The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about Narcissus

影
Putonghua pronunciation: ying3
Cantonese pronunciation: ying2
Meanings: shade, shadow, reflection, silhouette

光 (guang1, light) casts 影 (ying3 = shadows): 人影 (ren2 ying3 = persons’ shadows), 樹影 (shu4 ying3 = trees’ shadows). 影響 (ying3 xiang3 = shadow-sound) = influence. 電影 (dian4 ying3 = electric-shadows) = cinematography. 影子內閣 (ying3 zi0 nei4 ge2 = shadow-diminutive-internal-pavilion) = shadow cabinet.

Tabloid-story 捕風捉影 (bu4 feng1 zhuo1 ying3 = catch-wind-grab-shadow = picks up rumors), 影射 (ying3 she4 = shadow-shoot = allude to) celebrities. Pot-smoker sees 幻影 (huan4 ying3 = illusions-shadows), 鬼影 (gui3 ying3 = ghostly/eerie-shadows). 陰影 (yin1 ying3 = un-lit-shadow) means dark shadows or traumatic memory.

Love-birds 形影不離 (xing2 ying3 bu4 li2 = form-shadow-no-separate = are always together). Narcissus admired his own 倒影 (dao3 ying3 = inverted-shadow = reflection).

by Diana Yue