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 \ 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 Dunhuang

洞
Putonghua pronunciation: dong4
Cantonese pronunciation: dung6
Meaning: hole, pit, cave, cavity, grotto

洞 (radical 亻 = 水 shui3) means 洞穴 (dong4 xue2 = hole/cavity-cave): 山洞 (shan1 dong4 = mountain-cave), 水藻洞 (shui3 lian2 dong4 = water-curtain-cave = cave shaded off by cascade), 狐狸洞 (hul li1 dong4 = fox's-den/lair).

Machines 鑽洞 (zhuan4 dong4 = drill-holes). Dentists treat 牙洞 (ya2 dong4 = dental-cavities).

空洞 (kong1 dong4 = empty-hole/vacuous) describes person/speech without substance. 窟洞 (yao2 dong4 = kih/-hole = cave dwellings with internal brick/stone walls, common in NW China.

敦煌石窟 (Dun1 Huang1 shi2 ku1 = Dunhuang’s-stone-grottoes) are 岩洞 (yan2 dong4 = rock-hole = caves dug into rock/cliff) housing Buddhist shrines, statues, murals. 藏経洞 (cang2 jing1 dong4 = storing-sutras-caves) is where millennium-old Buddhist scriptures were discovered in 1900.

by Diana Yue