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 blossoming trees

杏
Putonghua pronunciation: xing4
Cantonese pronunciation: hang6
Meaning: apricot

杏 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree) = 杏花 (xing4 hua1 = apricot-flower), 杏樹 (xing4 shu4 = apricot-tree). 杏子 (xing4 zi0 = apricot-son/diminutive = apricot) yields 杏仁 (xing4 ren2 = apricot-kernel = almond). 杏仁餅 (xing4 ren2 bing3 = apricot-kernel-cake) = almond biscuit. 杏仁茶 (xing4 ren2 cha2 = almond-tea) is sweet soup made with ground/powdered almond. 杏林 (xing4 lin2 = apricot-forest) means medical circle. Patient honors doctor who saved him with plaque carrying words “杏滿杏林” (yü4 man3 xing4 lin2 = renown-fills-apricot-forest = “A physician of true distinction”).

杏眼圓睜 (xing4 yan3 yüan2 zheng1 = apricot-eyes-round-stare) describes pretty woman’s angry stare. 紅杏出牆 (hong2 xing4 chu1 qiang2 = red-apricot-sprig-climbs-out/over-wall) describes wife having illicit affair.

by Diana Yue