The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi, 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:

1) 1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2) 2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3) 3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4) 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

仙
Putonghua pronunciation: xian1
Cantonese pronunciation: sin1
Meanings: fairy, immortal

仙 (1 = 人 ren2, person + 山 shan1, mountain) = 神仙 (shen2 xian1 = god-fairy = transcendental being). Ancient Taoists 求仙 (qiu2 xian1 = seek-fairy = practiced alchemy to attain fairyhood/immortality). Folklores describe仙人 (xian1 ren2 = immortal-person = fairies/immortals), 仙境 (xian1 jing4 = fairy-places), 狐仙 (hu2 xian1 = fox-fairies).

詩仙 (shi1 xian1 = poetry-fairy) = poet with unworldly talent. 飄欲仙 (piao1 piao1 yu4 xian1 = float-float-almost-become-fairy) = feel elated/transcended. Euphemism 仙遊 (xian1 you2 = fairy-travel = gone/became fairy) means someone has died.

仙女 (xian1 nü3 = fairy-female = nymph) 艾柯 (ai4 ke1 = “Echo”-transliterated) loved Narcissus. But Narcissus drowned kissing his own reflection, became 水仙花 (shui3 xian1 hua1 = water-fairy-flower = narcissus/daffodil).

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