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

茶 (radical "艹 cao3, grass) = tea: 茶壺 (cha2 hu2 = tea-pot), 茶杯 (cha2 bei1 = tea-cup), 喝茶 (he1 cha2 = drink-tea): 萊莉花茶 (mo4 li4 hua1 cha2 = jasmine-flower-tea = jasmine tea), 英式奶茶 (ying1 shi1 nai3 cha2 = “Eng”lish-transliterated-style-milk-tea).

茶花 (cha2 hua1 = tea-flower = camellia), aka 山茶花 (shan1 cha2 hua1 = mountain-tea-flower), has 碗形花瓣 (wan3 xing3 hua1 ban4 = bowl-shaped-flower-petals).

Novelist 小仲馬 (Xiao3 Zhong4 Ma3 = little/yung-"Du-mas"-transliterated = Dumas fils) portrayed courtesan 茶花女 (cha2 hua1 nü3 = tea-flower-woman = La Dame aux Camélies) wearing 白茶花 (bai2 cha2 hua1 = white-tea-flower = white camellia), 紅茶花 (hong2 cha2 hua1 = red-tea-flower = red camellia).

by Diana Yue