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 Chinese moon goddess

月 Putonghua pronunciation: yüe4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuet6
Meanings: moon, month


Denoting time, 月份 (yüe4 fen4 = month-share) means month. 五月 (wu3 yüe4 = fifth-month) = May. 月经 (yüe4 jing1 = month-passage) = women’s menstruation. 月薪 (yüe4 xin1 = month’s-firewood) = monthly salary. 滿月 (man3 yüe4 = full-moon) also means baby becoming one-month-old.

日月星辰 (ri4 yüe4 xing1 chen2 = sun-moon-star-star) collectively means stars/planets/moons populating 宇宙 (yü3 zhou4 = four-dimensions-past-present-future = all space and all time = the universe).

by Diana Yue