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 pretty women

麗
Putonghua pronunciation: li4
Cantonese pronunciation: lai6
Meaning: beautiful, pretty

Pictogram 麗 (一 yi1, one/single + 鹿 lu4, deer) suggests handsome stag with two horns, means 美麗 (mei3 li4 = pretty-beautiful). 麗日藍天 (li4 ri4 lan2 tian1 = beautiful-sun-blue-sky) = nice sunny day. 壯麗山河 (zhuang4 li4 shan1 he2 = brave-beautiful-mountains-rivers) = country’s grand landscape.

天生麗質 (tian1 sheng1 li4 zhi4 = heaven-born-beautiful-quality) describes woman’s natural beauty. 清麗 (qing1 li4 = pure-looking-pretty) teenager becomes 美麗 (li4 li4 = gorgeous-beautiful) model, poses in 華麗 (hua2 li4 = luxurious-beautiful) costumes against 富麗 (fu4 li4 = rich/grand-spectacular) settings.

辨公室麗人 (ban4 gong1 shi1 li4 ren2 = handle-official-business-room-beautiful-person = office ladies) 煩妍麗麗 (zheng1 yan2 dou4 li4 = compete-glamor-vie-beauty = dress/make up to outshine each other).

by Diana Yue