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 romantic love

**燈**

Putonghua pronunciation: deng1
Cantonese pronunciation: dang1
Meanings: lamp

燈 (radical 火 huo3, fire) include 燈籠 (deng1 lon2 = lamp-cage = lantern), 電燈 (dian4 deng1 = electric-lamp), 燈塔 (deng1 ta3 = lamp-tower = lighthouse). 點燈 (dian3 deng2 = lighting-lamp/candle/lantern) yields 燈光 (deng1 guang1 = lamp-light).

Lovers-festival’s 燈會 (deng1 hui4 = lanterns-parade) features 花燈 (hua1 deng1 = flowery/colorful-lanterns), 孔明燈 (Kong3 Ming2 deng1 = general Zhuge Kong-ming’s lanterns), i.e. 天燈 (tian1 deng1 = sky-lanterns propelled skyward by candle’s hot-air).

燈火通明 (deng1 huo3 tong1 ming2 = lamp-fire-thoroughly bright) describes brightly-lit place. 燈火阑珊 (deng1 huo3 lan2 shan1 = lamp-fire-scattered/low) describes scene when lights have dimmed. Buddhists say 人死如燈滅 (ren2 si3 ru2 deng1 mie4 = man-die-resemble-lamp-extinguish = man’s death is like a candle’s extinction).

by Diana Yue