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 rainstorms

盆
Putonghua pronunciation: pen2
Cantonese pronunciation: poon4
Meaning: basin, dish, pot, tub, bowl

盆’s two parts (分 fen1, divide + 盆 min3, vessel/container) indicates big container for sub-divisible contents: 脸盆 (lian3 pen2 = face-basin = basin for washing face/hands), 洗盆 (zao3 pen2 = bath-tub). 倾盆大雨 (qing1 pen2 da4 yu3 = pour-basin-big-rain) = pouring/heavy rain.

盆栽 (pen2 zai1 = potted-plants) need 花盆 (hua1 pen2 = flower-pots). Chinese 盆景 (pen2 jing3 = miniature potted-landscape) = Japanese bonsai. 盆地 (pen2 di4 = basin-land) = basin, e.g. Tarim Basin.

Cantonese villages serve 盆菜 (pen1 cai4 = Cantonese “poon4 choi3”, aka Big Bowl Feast = big multi-ingredients pot).
Cantonese expression 盆满钵满 (pen2 man3 bo1 man3 = Cantonese “poon4 moon5 boot3 moons5” = basin-full-bowl-full) describes businessman up to the neck with profits/savings.

by Diana Yue