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

慕 (mu4)
Cantonese pronunciation: mo1
Meaning: admire, adore, love, aspire to, envy

慕 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means 愛慕 (ai4 mu4 = love-adore), 羨慕 (xian4 mu4 = envy-admire), 仰慕 (yang3 mu4 = look-up-to-adore). Music-lovers 慕名而來 (mu4 ming2 er2 lai2 = admire-name-so-come = drawn by his fame, come) for violinist's performance.

True moralists 饥渴慕義 (ji1 ke3 mu4 yi4 = hunger-and-thirst-after-righteousness). Colonial subjects who 慕權慕勢 (mu4 qian2 mu4 shi4 = adore-authority-adore-power = adore/envy those in high places) are usually 慕洋派 (mu4 yang2 pai1 = adore-overseas/foreign-faction = worshippers of anything western).

Confucian saying 知好色則慕少艾 (zhi1 hao4 se1 ze2 mu4 shao4 ai4 = know-like-color/beauty-thus-adore-young-beautiful = having sexual curiosity/urge, admire pretty girls) explains why teenagers naturally 思慕 (si1 mu4 = yearn-for-are-fond-of) the opposite sex.

by Diana Yue