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 eyes

眼
Putonghua pronunciation: yan3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngaan5
Meaning: eye, hole, opening, aperture

眼 (radical 目 mu4, eye) = 眼睛 (yan3 jing1 = eye’s-pupil = eyes).
看一眼 (kan4 yi1 yan3 = see/look-one-eye) = take a look. 捂眼淚 (diao4 yan3 lei4 = drop-eyes’-tears) = cry/weep.
眼 = hole/aperture: 针眼 (zhen1 yan3 = needle’s-eye), 泉眼 (quian2 yan3 = spring’s-source), 天眼 (tian1 yan3 = sky-eye = CCTV-camera). 錢眼 (qian2 yan3 = money/coin’s-eye) is hole on ancient coin. However, 見錢開眼 (jian4 qian2 kai1 yan3 = see- money-open-eyes) means pleased at/yielding to the sight of money.
好眼力 (hao3 yan3 li4 = good-eye-strength/power) describes person with good observation/judgment. Cantonese expression "冇眼睇" (Cantonese pronunciation “mou2 ngaan5 tai2 = no-eye-see) means I give up, don’t want to see this!"

by Diana Yue