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 willow trees

柳 (radical 木 mu4, tree/wood) = 柳樹 (liu3 shu4 = willow-tree), aka 楊柳 (yang2 liu3 = surname-Yang-willow). 垂柳 (chu1 liu3 = droop-willow) = weeping willows. 柳煙 (liu3 yan1 = willow-smoke) = light-green haze suggested by light-penetrable willow-leaves.

桃紅柳綠 (tao2 hong2 liu3 lü4 = peach-red-willow-green) describes gay springtime. 柳浪聞鷺 (liu3 lang4 wen2 ying1 = willow-waves-hear-oriole) = orioles singing among rippling willow-leaves. 柳眉 (liu3 mei2 = willow-eye-brows), 柳腰 (liu3 yao1 = willow-waist) describe pretty woman’s arched brows, slender waist.

Men visit 花街柳巷 (hua1 jie1 liu3 xiang4 = flowers-streets-willows-alleys = brothel districts), 尋花問柳 (xun2 hua1 wen4 liu3 = seek-flowers-ask-for-willows = find prostitutes), contract 花柳病 (hua1 liu3 bing4 = flowers-willows-disease = venereal diseases).

by Diana Yue