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

仙
Putonghua pronunciation: xian1
Cantonese pronunciation: sin1
Meaning: fairy, magical, immortal, celestial being in folklore

Ideogram 仙 (人 ren2, person + 山 shan1, mountain) means beyond mortal world: 神仙 (shen2 xian1 = deities/spirits-fairies), 仙境 (xian1 jing4 = fairy-realm), 仙山 (xian1 shan1 = fairy-mountain), 仙草 (xian1 cao3 = fairy/magic-herbs), 仙樂 (xian1 yue4 = heavenly-music). Daoists take 仙藥 (xian1 yao4 = fairy-elixir), 仙丹 (xian1 dan1 = fairy-pills), 煉仙 (lian4 xian1 = practice-alchemy-to-attain-fairyhood).

In Chinese folklore 百花仙子 (bai2 hua2 xian1 ziO = hundred-flowers-fairy-person) is fairy lady in charge of all flowers. Beautiful 狐仙 (hu2 xian1 = fox-fairies) bewitch men. Orgasm/LSD produces 欲仙欲死 (yu4 xian1 yu4 si3 = feel-like-fairy-feel-like-dying) effect.

Beauty queen 貌若天仙 (mao4 ruo4 tian1 xian1 = visage-resemble-heavenly-fairy = is as beautiful as a fairy/goddess).

by Diana Yue