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 Peach Blossom Fount

桃
Putonghua pronunciation: tao2
Cantonese pronunciation: to4
Meanings: peach tree, peach

桃 (radical 木 mu4, wood) = 桃樹 (tao2 shu4 = peach-tree). 桃李爭春 (tao2 li3 zeng1 chun1 = peach-plum-vie-for-spring) describes glorious springtime with blossoming peach-trees and plum-trees. 桃花 (tao2 hua1 = peach-blossom) symbolizes ill-fated woman. 桃色事件 (tao2 se1 shi4 jian4 = peach-color-event-item) means scandal involving women.

桃子 (tao2 zi3 = peach-diminutive) = peach fruit. 桃李 (tao2 li3 = peaches-and-plums) means teacher's successful students. Fairy-tales say eating 仙桃 (xian1 tao2 = fairy-peaches) brings longevity, hence Chinese birthday banquets serve peach-shaped 壽包 (shou4 bao1 = longevity-buns), also called 壽桃 (shou2 tao2 = longevity-peaches). Daoist exorciser uses 桃木劍 (tao2 mu4 jian4 = peach-wood-sword) to vanquish demons.

Fisherman rowed upstream, admiring 桃花林 (tao2 hua1 lin2 = peach-tree-blossom-forest/grove).

by Diana Yue