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 lovely sky

Putonghua pronunciation: yün2
Cantonese pronunciation: wan4
Meanings: cloud

Ideogram 雲 has radical 雨 (yù3, rain). Artists paint 白雲 (bai2 yün2 = white-clouds), 雲山 (yün2 shan1 = cloud-moutains = piled up clouds), 雲彩 (yün2 cai3 = cloud-multi-colors = prettily-colored clouds), 雲霧 (yün2 wu4 = clouds-mists/fogs).

Weather forecast reports 烏雲 (wu1 yün2 = black/dark-clouds), 雨雲 (yü3 yün2 = rain-clouds). Astronomers watch 雲層 (yün2 cheng2 = cloud-tiers), 星雲 (xing1 yün2 = stars-clouds = nebulas). However, 雲雨情 (yün2 yü3 qing2 = clouds-rain-love) means sexual affair.

“行到水窮處 (xing2 dao4 shui3 qiong2 chu4 = walk-reach-water-exhaust-place), 坐看雲起時 (zuo4 kan4 yün2 qi3 shi2 = sit-watch-clouds-rise-time)” are famous lines describing poet’s solitary excursion into nature: “Walk up to the stream’s source, sit and watch the clouds rise”.

by Diana Yue