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

源

Putonghua pronunciation: yüan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen4
Meanings: source, origin, fountain head, cause

源 (源 = 水 shui3, water + 原 yuan2, origin) means river/stream’s source: 源頭 (yuan2 tou2 = fountain-head), 起源 (qi2 yuan2 = begin-source = origin/cause), 根源 (gen1 yuan2 = root-source = origin). Desert travelers seek 水源 (shui3 yuan2 = water-source = spring/stream). 黃河源 (Huang2 He2 yuan2 = Yellow-River’s-source) is in Qinghai Province.

源遠流長 (yuan2 yuan3 liu2 chang2 = source~distant~flow-long) describes age-old traditions/customs. 源源不絕 (yuan2 yuan 2bu4 jie2 = flowing~flowing~no~cut-off = endless) supplies/help make charity-recipients 飲水思源 (yin3 shui3 si1 yuan2 = drink~water~think~source = feel thankful for blessings/favors).

桃花源 (tao2 hua1 yuan2 = peach-blossom-fount = source of stream hidden among peach-trees) 源於 (yuan2 yu1 = originates~from) Chinese literature, is Chinese version of utopia.

by Diana Yue