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

霞
Putonghua pronunciation: xia2
Cantonese pronunciation: ha4
Meanings: glowing clouds, color of sunlight

霞 (radical 雨 yǔ3, rain) means 彩霞 (cai3 xia2 = colorful-glow of clouds). 朝陽 (zhao1 yang2 = morning-sun) radiates 朝霞 (zhao1 xia2 = morning-glow). 夕陽 (xi2 yang2 = evening-sun) radiates 晚霞 (wan3 xia2 = evening-glow).

燦若雲霞 (chan4 ruo4 yü2 xia2 = radiant-as-clouds-glowing-clouds) describes woman’s radiant visage. 一抹紅霞 (yi1 mo4 hong2 xia2 = one-swipe-red-glow) describes pink blush on girl’s face.

Famous lines “落霞與孤鷺齊飛 (luo4 xia2 yü3 gu1 wu4 qi2 fei1 = descending-clouds-and-lonely-duck-together-fly”, “秋水共長天一色 (qiu1 shui3 gong4 chang2 tian1 yi1 se1 = autumn-water-with-long-sky-one-color)” describe autumn scenery: “A lone bird flies in the evening glow; the river merges into the sky, sharing its color.”

by Diana Yue