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**

**星**

Putonghua pronunciation: **xing1**
Cantonese pronunciation: **sing1**
Meanings: star

星 has radical 日 (ri4, sun). 恒星 (heng2 xing1 = eternal-star = suns/stars), 行星 (xing2 xing1 = wandering-star = planets) populate 星空 (xing1 kong1 = starry-sky). 星際旅行 (xing1 ji4 lü3 xing2 = stars-among-travel=walk) = interstellar travel. 星球大戰 (xing1 qiu2 da4 zhan4 = star-sphere-big-war) = star wars.

月 (yue4) = moon. 罡星拱月 (zhong4 xing1 gong3 yue4 = many-stars-prop-up-moon) describes attentively escorted person. 擦帚星 (sao4 zhou3 xing1 = sweep-broom-star) means comet or person bringing bad luck.

“星垂野闊” (xing1 shui2 ping2 ye3 kuo4 = star-hangs-over-flat-wilderness-wide), “月潎大江流” (yue4 yong3 da4 jiang1 liu2 = moon-gushes-out-big-river-flows) are famous lines describing evening landscape: “Star hanging over open plain; moon bursting upon mighty river’s flow.”

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