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

虹
Putonghua pronunciation: hong2
Cantonese pronunciation: hung4
Meanings: rainbow

Ideogram 虹 shows 虫 (chong2, worm) plus 工 (gong1, finely-crafted) = beautiful dragon/arched shape. When 雨過天青 (yu3 guo4 tian1 qing1 = rain-pass-sky-blue = rain-washed blue sky appears), 天虹 (tian1 hong2 = sky-arc/rainbow) appears. Hence English “rainbow”, French “arc du ciel” (literally “arc of/in sky”).

彩虹 (cai3 hong2 = colorful-rainbow) has seven colors: 紅 (hong2, red), 橙 (cheng3, orange), 黃 (huang2, yellow), 綠 (liu4, green), 青 (qing1, blue), 藍 (lan2, indigo), 紫 (zi3, violet). 霓虹燈 (ni2 hong2 deng1 = glowing-cloud-rainbow-lamp) = “neon”-transliterated lights. 虹橋 (hong2 qiao2 = rainbow-bridge) is traditional-style arched wooden bridge.

气勢如虹 (qi4 shi4 ru2 hong2 = energy-force-resemble-rainbow) describes highly-spirited advancing army/team. 劍氣如虹 (jian4 qi4 ru2 hong2 = sword-energy-resemble-rainbow) describes dashing swordsman wielding sword/epee.

by Diana Yue