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 rice-planting

米
Putonghua pronunciation: mi3
Cantonese pronunciation: mai5
Meanings: de-husked raw rice-grain

Character 米 resembles grain-crop: 大米 (da4 mi3 = big-rice = rice), 小米 (xiao3 mi3 = small-rice = millet). When 禾熟 (he2 shou2 = grain-crops-ripen), peasants 收割 (shou1 gei1 = collect-cut = reap harvest). 打穀 (da3 gu3 = beat-husk-coated-rice-grain = thrashing) removes 稻 (kang1, husks).

白米 (bai2 mi3 = white-rice = de-husked rice-grains) boiled produce 飯 (fan4, cooked rice). Sake is 米酒 (mi3 jiu3 = rice-wine). 魚米之鄉 (yu2 mi3 zhi1 xiang1 = fish-rice-'s-country/home) means region with rich agricultural/rice/fish produce. 吃飯 (chi1 fan4 = eat-rice) means taking meal, getting fed. Losing 飯碗 (fan4 wan3 = rice-bowl = income-fetching job), we’ll 餓飯 (e4 fan4 = hunger-rice = go hungry), even 要飯 (yao4 fan4 = want/ask-rice = go begging).

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