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 the tastes

甜 Pinyin: tian 2
Meanings: sweet

甜 = 甘甜 (gan tian 12 = tasty-sweet) describes 蜂蜜 (feng mi 14 = bees-honey), 巧克力 (qiao ke li 314 = “chocolate”-transliterated). 嗜甜 (shi tian 42 = likes-sweet) = means having a sweet tooth.


甘之如饴 (gan zhi ru yi 1122 = taste-relish-it-like-candy) means willingly accepting/doing an unpleasant thing/task. PRC government asks people to 憶苦思甜 (yi ku si tian 1312 = remember-bitterness-think/reflect-sweet = remember country’s tragic history, treasure today’s achievements).

by Diana Yue