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

辣
Putonghua pronunciation: la 4
Meanings: spicy-hot taste, cruel

Spicy-hot cuisine uses 薑 (jiang 1 = ginger), 胡椒 (hu jiao 21 = Hu-origin-pepper = pepper=corns/powder), 辣椒 (la jiao 41 = hot-capsicum = capsicum/pepper/chilli). People who 嗜辣 (shi la 44 = like-hot-taste-food) like 酸辣湯 (suan la tang 141 = sour-hot-soup = Sichuan-style meat broth with vinegar and pepper), 咖喱 (ga li 13 = “curry”-transliterated). 怕辣 (pa la 44 = fear-hot) = cannot stand spicy-hot food.

辛香料 (xin xiang liao 114 = bitter-hot-taste-fragrant-materials) = spices. 下筆辛辣 (xia bi xin la 4314 = down/apply-pen-bitter-hot) describes writer using piercing/bitter/forceful/sarcastic language.

心狠手辣 (xin hen shou la 1234 = heart-cruel-hand-hot = evil-intentioned, cruel in action), 辣手摧花 (la shou cui hua 4311 = hot/cruel-hand-destroy-flower) describe rapists/women-killers.

by Diana Yue