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 gourmet dining

Putonghua pronunciation: hua 2
Cantonese pronunciation: wa 4
Meanings: splendid, glamorous, grand, luxurious

Etymologically, 華 = 花 (hua 1 = flower). 中華民族 (zhong hua min zu 1222 = central-flower-people-tribe) is the Chinese race. 水木 清華 (shui mu qing hua 3412 = water-wood-clear/unpolluted-luxuriant) describes spots with lovely streams/ponds and tress/shrubs, e.g. the site of Beijing’s 清華大學 (qing hua da xue 1242 = Clear-Luxuriant-big-school = Qinghua University).

繁華 (fan hua 22 = elaborate-grand) describes cities' splendor/prosperity. 華衣美食 (hua yi mei shi 2132 = glamorous/expensive-clothes-beautiful-food) describes an extravagant lifestyle. 豪華 (hao hua 22 = /expensive-grand = de luxe) restaurants host 華筵 (hua yan 22 = grand-banquets).

華 is opposite of 實 (shi 2 = fruit/solid/practical). 華而不實 (hua er bu shi 2242 = grand-and/not-solid) means superficial grandeur without substance.

by Diana Yue