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 salads

素
Putonghua pronunciation: su4
Cantonese pronunciation: so3
Meanings: white, white silk, uncolored, unadorned, plain, vegetarian, basic element

素 (radical 糸 mi4, rope/string) means white/uncolored silk, hence 素白 (su4 bai2 = uncolored-white) means light/plain/white-color. 樸素 (pu3 su4 = un-lavish-unadorned) = frugal. 素服 (su4 fu2 = white-clothes) = plainly dressed, without adornment, as in mourning. 元素 (yuan2 su4 = primary-factor) = chemical element.

Devout Buddhists 吃素 (chi1 su4 = eat-plain = take vegetarian diet without meat/eggs). Most people 吃荤 (chi1 hun1 = eat-meat/fish = are non-vegetarian). 素雞 (su4 ji1 = vegetable-chicken), 素鵝 (su4 e2 = vegetable-goose), made from tofu, are imitations of chicken/goose meat.

青菜 (qing1 cai4 = green-leafy-vegetables) contain 葉綠素 (ye4 lu4 su4 = leaf-green-element = chlorophyll). 水果 (shui3 guo3 = water-fruit = fruits) contain 維生素 (wei2 sheng1 su4 = sustain-life-element = vitamins).

by Diana Yue