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

巧
Putonghua pronunciation: qiao 3
Cantonese pronunciation: haau 2
Meaning: finely-crafted, dainty, delicate

巧 means 精巧 (jing qiao 13 = fine-delicate), 巧妙 (qiao miao 34 = delicate-wonderful = cleverly conceived/arranged). 巧巧玲瓏 (xiao qiao ling long 2322 = small-delicate-well-carved-jade) describes small fineries or petite girls.

On 七夕 (qi xi 12 = sevens-night = Qixi Festival in autumn), Chinese/Japanese girls 乞巧 (qi qiao 13 = beg-fine-craft = pray for sewing/embroidering talent). 高級烹飪 (gao ji peng ren 1214 = high-class-cook-food = haute cuisine), 懷石料理 (huai shi liao li 2243 = Japan’s kaiseki ryori) require 巧廚 (qiao chu 22 = fine-cooks/chefs).

巧婦難為無米之炊 (qiao fu nan wei wu mi zhi chui 2322311 = fine-housewife-difficult-make-no-rice-撮-cooking) means no one, however capable, can produce results without basic resources.

by Diana Yue