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 wheat-planting

Putonghua pronunciation: mian4
Cantonese pronunciation: min6
Meanings: wheat-flour, wheat-flour dough, wheat-flour noodle

麵 = 麥 (mai4, wheat) + 面 (mian4, face). Wheat grains are ground into 麵粉 (mian4 fen3 = wheat-flour-powder). Baker 擀麴 (gan3 mian4 = kneads-wheat-flour-dough), makes 麵包 (mian4 bao1 = wheat-flour-pouch = bread).

麵條 (mian4 tiao2 = wheat-flour-string) = noodle: 生麴 (sheng1 mian4 = raw-noodle = freshly-made noodles), 乾麴 (gan1 mian4 = dried-noodles). 意大利麴 (Yi4 Da4 Li4 mian4 = “Italy”-transliterated-noodle) = Italian pasta. Japanese soba is 蕎麴 (qiao2 mai4 mian4 = buckwheat-noodle). Japanese ramen comes from Chinese 拉麴 (la1 mian4 = pulled-noodle, made by pulling/stretching dough into strings).

方便麴 (fang1 bian4 mian4 = instant-easy-noodle) = 即食麴 (ji2 shi2 mian4 = immediate-eat-noodle = instant noodles) symbolize today’s mass culture which hastily/unthinkingly swallows/adopts foreign trends.

by Diana Yue