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

Putonghua pronunciation: wei2
Cantonese pronunciation: wai4
Meanings: tie, maintain, preserve, keep

維 (radical 王 = 糸 mi4, rope/string) means tie/maintain, hence維持 (wei2 chi2 = maintain-hold) means maintain/preserve. Parents 維護 (wei2 hu4 = keep-protect = protect) their children. Garages 維修 (wei2 xiu1 = keep-mend = repair) cars.

Employees work to 維生 (wei2 sheng1 = maintain-livelihood/sustenance). Vitamin is translated as 維生素 (wei2 sheng1 su4 = sustain-life-element). Vitamin’s Chinese transliteration 維他命 (wei2 ta1 ming4 = sustain-his-life) gave name to Hong Kong’s soy-drink 維他奶 (wei2 ta1 nai3 = sustain-his-milk = Vitasoy). Vegetables/fruit provide 纖維 (qian1 wei2 = minute-strings = fibres/roughage) for bowels.

War-torn country needs the United Nations’ 維和部隊 (wei2 he2 bu4 dui4 = maintain-peace-section-team = Peacekeeping Force) to 維穩 (wei2 wen3 = keep-steady = maintain social stability).

by Diana Yue