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: fan 2
Cantonese pronunciation: faan 4
Meanings: much, many, elaborate

繁 is opposite of 簡 (jian 3 = simple). 簡體字 (jian ti zi 234 = simple-form-words = simplified Chinese characters) are condensed from 繁體字 (fan ti zi 234 = elaborate-form-words = traditional Chinese characters).

Rush-hour traffic is 繁忙 (fan mang 22 = packed-busy). Big organizations have 繁文縟節 (fan wen ru jie 2242 = elaborate-documentation/rules/many-rituals = elaborate protocols).

Chinese cuisine 菜式繁多 (cai shi fan duo 4121 = dishes-styles-elaborate-many = covers a huge range of dishes), 製作繁複 (zhi zuo fan fu 4122 = produce-make-elaborate-complicated = complicated to make). But 經濟繁榮 (jing ji fan rong 1422 = rule-supply-much-prosper = economic prosperity) supports 豪華 night (hao hua ye yan 2244 = extravagant-grand-evening-banquet = extravagant dining).

by Diana Yue