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 feeding of the five thousand

餓  
Putonghua pronunciation: e4  
Cantonese pronunciation: ngoh6  
Meanings: hungry, starve, famished, starve someone, yearning for

餓 has radical 食 (shi2, eat/food). 我餓了! (wo3 e4 le0 = I-hungry~ed) = I’m hungry! 餓壞了! (e4 huai4 le0 = hungry-bad-ed) = I’m starved! 餓 + synonym 饑 (ji1) = adjective/noun 饑餓 (ji1 e4 = hungry/hunger). 饑民 (ji1 min2 = starving-people = famine victims) 饑死 (e4 si3 = starve-to-death). 捨饑抵餓 (ai2 ji1 di3 e4 = suffering-hunger-resisting-hunger) = persisting without food.

餓鬼 (e4 gui3 = hungry-ghost) = person keen/dying to devour/enjoy food. Beggar 餓飯 (e4 fan4 = hungry-for-cooked-rice = lack/want food). 餓虎擒羊 (e4 hu3 qin2 yang2 = hungry-tiger-capturing-lamb) describes predator attacking, overpowering prey.

Crowd following Jesus 餓肚皮 (e4 du4 pi2 = starve-stomach-skin = went on hungry stomach) to hear him preach.

by Diana Yue