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 diet abstinence

齋 (zhai1) Putonghua pronunciation: zhæi1 Cantonese pronunciation: jaa1
Meanings: fast, abstain from meat etc., vegetarian diet

齋 (= 素 su4, vegetarian diet) is opposite of 肅 (hun1 = non-vegetarian). 吃齋 (chi1 zhai1 = 吃素 chi1 su4 = eat-vegetarian) = go vegetarian. Chinese 齋菜 (zhai1 cai4 = vegetarian-dishes) feature 蔬菜 (shu1 cai4 = grasses-leafy-vegetables), 豆腐 (dou4 fu4 = bean-curd/tofu). 菌類 (jün1 lei4 = fungus-type = fungi/mushrooms).

齋 also means fasting. 伊斯蘭教 (yi1 si1 lan2 jiao4 = "Islam"-transliterated-religion = Islam)’s followers 守齋 (shou3 zhai1 = keep-fast) during齋月 (zhai1 yue4 = fasting-month = Ramadan). Buddhists oppose 殺生 (sha4 sheng1 = killing-of-lives), advocate 吃長齋 (chi1 chang2 zhai1 = eat-long-vegetarian = always eat vegetarian). However, hypocrites 齋口不齋心 (zhai1 kou3 bu4 zhai1 xin1 = vegetarian-mouth-no-vegetarian-heart = eat vegetarian but have unclean/bad thoughts).

by Diana Yue