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

饼 Putonghua pronunciation: bing3
Cantonese pronunciation: beng2
Meanings: cake, biscuit, bread

饼 has radical 食 (shi2, eat/food). Baker kneads 麦粉 (mai4 fen3 = wheat-flour) into 麵團 (mian4 tuan2 = wetted-flour-lump = dough), adds 餅餡 (bing3 xian4 = cake-fillings/stuffings), bakes 餅餡饼 (xian4 bing3 = fillings-cake = pies).

饼店 (bing3 dian4 = cake/pastry-shop) sells 結婚饼 (jie2 hun1 bing3 = tie-marriage-cake = wedding cakes), 嫁女饼 (jia4 nü3 bing3 = marry-daughter-cake = bride's Chinese-style dowry cakes), 西饼 (xi1 bing3 = west-cake = western-style fancy cakes). 燙餅 (sha01 bing3 = burn/roast-cake = sesame-seed griddle cake), 油條 (you2 tiao2 = oil-strip = fried dough), 豆漿 (dou4 jiang1 = bean-soup = soybean milk) make regular Chinese breakfast.

畫餅充饑 (hua4 bing3 chong1 ji1 = draw-cake-fill-hunger) = promising/presenting empty solution for real problem.

by Diana Yue