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

Putonghua pronunciation: bao3
Cantonese pronunciation: baaau2
Meanings: satiated, full, satisfied

飽 (radical 食 sh2, eat/food) is opposite of 餓 (e4, hungry). 吃個飽 (chi1 ge4 bao3 = eat-a-full) = stuff yourself to the full. 看個飽 (kan4 ge4 bao3 = look/watch-a-full) = look/watch as much as you want. Having been 餵飽 (wei34 bao3 = fed-to-the-full), baby 打飽嗝 (da3 bao3 ge2 = give-out-full-burp = burp with full stomach).

People want 溫飽 (wen1 bao3 = warm-full = enough clothing/shelter and food = minimal/modest standard of living). 吃不飽 (chi1 bu4 bao3 = eat-not-full) = not having enough to eat. 飽了 (bao3 le0 = full-ed) = I’m full.

飽滿 (bao3 man3 = satiated-full) describes plump cheeks/figure. 飽歷風霜 (bao3 li4 feng1 shuang1 = fully-experienced-wind-frost) = has had a hard life.