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 hungry stomach

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

餓 (radical 食 shi2, eat/food) = 饑餓 (ji1 e4 = famished-hungry).
Doctor: 餓嗎? (e4 ma1 = hungry-interrogative) = 饑不餓 (e4 bu4 e4 = hungry-no-hungry) = Are you hungry? Hunger-striker: 餓! (hen3 e4 = Very-hungry!) 餓壞了! (e4 huai4 le0 = hungry-bad/ruined-ed = I'm badly starved!)

饑民 (ji1 min2 = starving-people = famine victims) 捨饑抵餓 (ai2 ji1 di3 e4 = suffer-hunger-resist-hunger = carry on without food), 饑腸辘辘 (ji1 chang2 lu4 lu4 = famished-intestines-“lu-lu”-grinding-sound = feel bowels grinding), finally 餓死 (e4 si3 = starve-to-death).

饑虎擒羊 (e4 hu3 qin2 yang2 = hungry-tiger-catch-lamb) describes predator overpowering prey, 色中饑鬼 (se1 zhong1 e4 gui3 = color/lust-inside-hungry-ghost) describes horny man insatiably lusting after women.