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 Chinese recipes

飯
Putonghua pronunciation: fan4
Cantonese pronunciation: faan6
Meanings: cooking rice, meal

Making 炒飯 (chao3 fan4 = stir-fry-rice = fried rice) with 臘飯 (sheng4 fan4 = leftover-rice), 臘菜 (sheng4 cai4 = leftover-vegi/dishes): Break 飯團 (fan4 tuan2 = rice-lumps) into 飯粒 (fan4 li1 = rice-grains). Dice/julienne leftover 肉 (rou4, meat), 菜 (cai4, vegi), season with 醬油 (jiang4 you2 = soy-sauce), 酒 (jiu3, wine).

Heat finely-chopped 薑 (jiang1, ginger) in oiled wok, add rice, stir evenly with 鑊刻 (huo4 chan3 = wok-spade = spatula/turner/flipper). Stir in leftovers, one 蛋 (dan4, egg), salt, pepper, 麻油 (ma2 you2 = sesame-oil). Done! “化腐朽為神奇!” (hua4 fu4 xiu3 wei2 shen2 qi2 = transform-decayed-rotten-into- awesome-wonder = “It’s a miracle!”)

炒冷飯 (chao2 leng3 fan4 = stir-fry-cold-rice) also means re-do an old idea/story without innovation.

by Diana Yue