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 cold snacks

冰
Putonghua pronunciation: bing1
Cantonese pronunciation: bing1
Meanings: ice

冰 (radical 水 shui3) means ice/icy/iced: 冰雪 (bing1 xue3 = ice-and-snow), 冰河 (bing1 he2 = ice-river/glacier), 冰雕 (bing1 diao1 = ice-sculpture). 冰山一角 (bing1 shan1 yi1 jiao3 = ice-mountain-one-corner/angle/tip) = tip of the iceberg. 冷冰冰 (leng3 bing1 bing1 = cold-icy-icy) describes frigid expression/attitude.

冰箱 (bing1 xiang1 = ice-box/refrigerator) keeps things 冰凉 (bing1 liang2 = icy-cool). White wine needs 冰镇 (bing1 zhen4 = ice-anchored = chilled with ice-cubes). 威士忌加冰 (wei1 shi4 ji4 jia1 bing1 = “Whiskey”-transliterated-add-ice) = Whiskey on the rocks.

冰棍兒 (bing1 gun4 er0 = ice-stick-diminutive) = popsicle. 眼睛吃冰淇淋 (yan3 jing1 chi4 bing1 qi2 lin2 = eyes-pupils-eat-ice-“cream”-transliterated = “eyes eat ice-cream”) = feasting your eyes on pretty girls.

by Diana Yue