The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (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

缺 (radical 勺 fou3, pot + 夷 que1, broken) means 缺少 (que1 shao3 = lack-short-of), 缺乏 (que1 fa2 = lacking-impoverished): 缺水 (que1 shui3 = lacking-water), 缺电 (que1 dian4 = out-of-electricity), 缺人 (que1 ren2 = lacking-people/staff), 缺氧 (que1 yang3 = lacking-oxygen). 三缺一 (san1 que1 yi2 = three-lack-one) describes three mahjong/bridge players lacking fourth player.

月圆月缺 (yue4 yuan2 yue4 que1 = moon-round-moon-incomplete) = moon waxes and wanes. 缺点 (que1 dian3 = lacking-point) = person/concept’s defect. 缺陷 (que1 xian4 = broken-sunken) = physical defect, but artists praise one-armed Venus de Millo’s 缺憾 (que1 han4 mei3 = defect-regret- beauty = charm/appeal despite regrettable defect).

Zoo 缺钱 (que1 qian2 = lacks-money), so animals 缺粮 (que1 liang2 = lack-grains/food).

by Diana Yue