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

胃
Putonghua pronunciation: wei4
Cantonese pronunciation: wai6
Meaning: stomach

胃 (田 tian2, farm-plot + 月 = 肉 rou4, flesh/meat, i.e. grain-receiving body organ) means 胃囊 (wei4 nang2 = stomach-pouch): 胃纳 (wei4 na4 = stomach-intake-volume), 胃胃 (chang2 wei4 = intestines-stomach = digestive system). 胃酸 (wei4 suan1 = stomach’s-sour/acid) = 胃液 (wei4 ye4 = stomach’s/gastric/digestive-fluid/juice).

胃藥 (wei4 yao4 = stomach-medicine) treats 胃病 (wei4 bing4 = stomach-illness). 胃潰瘍 (wei4 kui4 yang2 = stomach-collapse/rot-ulcer = stomach ulcer), 胃癌 (wei4 ai2 = stomach-cancer) cause 胃痛 (wei4 teng3 = stomach-aches/pains).

Hungry person 好胃口 (hao3 wei4 kou3 = good-stomach-mouth = has good appetite). Greedy haggler 胃口大 (wei4 kou3 da4 = appetite-big = wants a lot), 令人反胃 (ling4 ren2 fan3 wei4 = cause-people-reverse/revolt-stomach = is revolting/disgusting).

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