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

甜
Putonghua pronunciation: tian2
Cantonese pronunciation: tim4
Meanings: sweet, sugary

Ideogram 甜 (舌 she2, tongue + 甘 gan1, good-tasting) means sweet/sugary/tasty: 糖果 (tang2 guo3 = sugar-fruit = candy)’s 甜味 (tian2 wei4 = sweet-taste), fruit/broth’s 鲜甜 (xian1 tian2 = fresh-sweet/flavorsome) aroma/taste, girl’s 甜美 (tian2 mei3 = sweet-lovely) face/smile.

甜心 (tian2 xin1 = sweet-heart)’s kiss makes girl’s heart feel 甜丝丝 (tian2 si1 si1 = sweet-filament-filament = sweet/tickled). 甜頭 (tian2 tou2 = sweet-tip/head = goodies/gains) emboldens investor. 甜蜜生活 (tian2 mi4 sheng1 huo2 = sweet-honey-life-live) = la dolce vita.

Person who 喜甜 (shi4 tian2 = likes-sweet-food) likes 甜品 (tian2 pin3 = sweet-opus/dish = desserts): 糖水 (tang2 shui3 = sugar-water = sweet soups), 八寶飯 (ba1 bao3 fan4 = eight-treasures-cooked-rice = glutinous rice pudding with diced candy/raisins/nuts).

by Diana Yue