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 fatty foods

Putonghua pronunciation: fei2
Cantonese pronunciation: fei4
Meanings: fat, fatty, large, loose, rich, fertile

Ideogram 肥 (肉 rou4, flesh/meat + 巴 ba1, loose) indicates fatty/loose flesh: 肥胖 (fei2 pang4 = fat-plump), 减肥 (jian3 fei2 = reduce-fat/weight). 肥美 (fei2 mei3 = fat/rich/fertile- beautiful) soil yields 肥壮 (fei2 zhuang4 = fat-strong) crops. Pigs/ crustaceans yield 肥肉 (fei2 rou4 = fatty-flesh/meat), 肥膏 (fei2 gao1 = rich-fat/roe).

腦滿腸肥 (nao3 man3 chang2 fei2 = brain-full-intestines-fat) describes swollen/unsightly look of gourmands/money-chasers. 肥羊 (fei2 yang2 = fat-lamb) also means easy prey. Idiom 人怕出名豬怕肥 (ren2 pa4 chu1 ming2 zhu1 pa4 fei2 = person-fear-burst-name-pig-fear-fat) means “Getting fame/publicity inconveniences people; being fat is bad for pigs”.

Poet describes late-spring garden-scene as 绿肥红瘦 (lü4 fei2 hong2 shou4 = green-fat-red-thin = “leaves flourishing, flowers emaciated”).

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