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 eggs

Putonghua pronunciation: huang2
Cantonese pronunciation: wong4
Meanings: yellow, yolk, earthen color, indecent activity

黃 is color of 黃金 (huang2 jin1 = yellow-gold = gold). Autumn leaves 轉黃 (zhuan3 huang2 = turn-yellow). 黃熟 (huang2 shu2 = yellow-ripen) describes ripened crops. 黃昏 (huang2 hun1 = yellow-dim) = evening tinted by setting sun.

Chinese are 黃種人 (huang2 zhong3 ren2 = yellow-species/race-people = yellow-people). 黃土 (huang2 tu3 = yellow-earth) = earth-soil. In northern-central China, 黃河 (Huang2 He2 = the Yellow-River) deposits silt, forming 黃土高原 (huang2 tu3 gao1 yuan2 = yellow-earth-high-plain = loess plateau).

蟹黃 (xie4 huang2 = crab-yellow) = crab’s golden-colored roe. 蛋黃 (dan4 huang2 = egg-yellow) = egg yolk. Harbors display artist Florentijn Hofman’s 30-metre model of 小黃鴨 (xiao3 huagn2 ya1 = little-yellow-duck = yellow rubber duckling, kids’ common plaything).

by Diana Yue