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 Hong Kong food

鮮
Putonghua pronunciation: xian 1
Cantonese pronunciation: sin 1
Meanings: fresh, fresh rich flavor

鮮 = 魚 (yu2, fish) + 羊 (yang2, mutton/lamb). 鮮美 (xian1 mei3 = fresh-lovely) describes fresh tasty food. 海鮮 (hai3 xian1 = sea-fresh) = seafood. 河鮮 (he2 xian1 = river-fresh) = river catch.

Markets sell 鮮魚 (xian1 yu2 = fresh-fish), 鮮肉 (xian1 rou4 = fresh-meat), 鮮菜 (xian1 cai4 = fresh-vegetables), 鮮果 (xian1 guo3 = fresh-fruit). Cooks add 味精 (wei4 jing1 = taste-essence = MSG) to food to enhance 鮮味 (xian1 wei4 = flavorsome-taste = flavor).

鮮花插在牛糞上 (xian1 hua1 cha1 zai4 niu2 fen4 shang4 = fresh/pretty-flower-stuck-on-cow-dung-surface) describes pretty woman married/attached to ugly/dumb man. 旗幟鮮明 (qi2 zhi4 xian1 ming2 = flag-banner-sharp-bright = flashing sharp-looking clearly-identifiable flags/banners) describes parties/newspapers showing obvious political stance.

by Diana Yue