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 the digestive system

尿
Putonghua pronunciation: shi3
Cantonese pronunciation: si2
Meanings: faeces, stool, shit

Ideogram 屎 shows unpleasant radical 尸 (＝屍 shi1, corpse) + 米 (mi3, rice). 屎尿 (shi3 niao4 = faeces-and-urine) are synonymous with 大小便 (da4 xiao3 bian4 = big-small~ convenience = nouns “stool, urine” or verbs “stool, urinate”). 放屁 (fang4 pi4 = release-fart) also means “Rubbish/bullshit!”

便血 (bian4 xue3 = stool-blood) = blood in ulcer/piles patient’s 糜便 (fen4 bian4 = faeces-convenience/stool). Before houses had flush toilets, faeces-collectors 倒粪 (dao3 fen4 = pour-faeces = take away faeces/excrements in buckets) before dawn. 化粪池 (hua4 fen4 chi2 = dissolve-faeces-pond) = septic tank.

臭屎 (chou4 shi3 = stinking-faeces) is revolting. But 莊子 (philosopher Zhuang1-zi3) says: 道在便溺 (dao4 zai4 bian4 ni4 = Tao-present-at-faeces-urine): “The Tao/Way manifests itself everywhere, even in excrements.”

by Diana Yue