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

公雞 (gong1 ji1 = father/grandpa-chicken) = cock, 母雞 (mu3 ji1 = mother-chicken) = hen, 小雞 (xiao3 ji1 = little-chicken) = chicks. 鶴立雞群 (he4 li4 ji1 qun2 = stork-standing-among-chicken-flock) describes outstanding person outshining others. 火雞 (huo3 ji1 = fire-chicken) = turkey.

走地雞 (zou3 di4 ji1 = run-ground-chicken) = free range chicken. To make 白斬雞 (bai2 zhan3 ji1 = white-chopped-chicken = chicken steamed then chopped/pieced), use 活雞 (huo2 ji1 = live-chicken = chicken freshly slaughtered), never 雪雞 (xue3 ji1 = snow-chicken = frozen chicken).

Cantonese says “prostitutes/women 做雞” (zuo4 ji1 = make/be/do-chicken = sell their bodies), “men 叫雞” (jiao4 ji1 = call/order-chicken/call-girls/prostitutes), perhaps because in Putonghua 雞 sounds like 妓 (ji4 = prostitute/whore).

by Diana Yue