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 Chinese tonic medicines

膳 Putonghua pronunciation: shan4
Cantonese pronunciation: sin6
Meaning: meal, food

膳 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, meat/flesh) means 膳食 (shan4 shi2 = meal-food). 膳堂 (shan4 tang2 = food-halls/canteens) serve 早膳 (zao3 shan4 = early/morning-meals = breakfasts), 午膳 (wu3 shan4 = noon/midday-meals = lunches), 晚膳 (wan3 shan4 = evening/night-meals = dinners).

Restaurants serve 美膳佳肴 (mei3 shan4 jia1 ao2 = beautiful-meals-good-dishes = delicious/gourmet dishes). Monks/nuns eat 齋膳 (zhai1 shan4 = vegetarian-meals).

Chinese physicians prescribes 藥膳 (yao4 shan4 = medicine-meal = dishes having medicinal ingredients) as 食療 (shi2 liao2 = food-therapy): 湯羹 (tang1 geng1 = soups-thick-broths) prepared by 炖 (dun4, slow-cooking), 煮 (zhu3, boiling), using 枸杞 (gou3 qi3 = Latin lyceum = wolfberries/gouqi-berries/goji-berries), 鱎鴨蛋 (an1 chun2 dan4 = quail’s-eggs), 當歸 (dang1 gui1 = angelica sinensis) etc.

by Diana Yue