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 pregnancy

精

Putonghua pronunciation: jìng 1
Cantonese pronunciation: jìng 1
Meanings: essence, fine, sperm

精 means essence/fine: 精肉 (jìng1 rou4 = fine/lean-meat), 精英 (jìng1 yīng1 = fine-flower/hero = crème de la crème/elite). Men in 精壯之年 (jìng1 zhuàng4 zhi1 nián2 = fine-strong-’s-years = physical prime) have 精力 (jìng1 li4 = energy-strength). Men’s 精液 (jìng1 yì4 = essence-fluid = semen) contains 精蟲 (jìng1 chōng2 = essence-worms = sperms).

Sexually-roused man inserts 陽具 (yáng2 ju4 = yang/male-tool/organ = penis) into woman’s 陰道 (yīn1 dào4 = yin/female-passageway = vaginal tract). Reaching 高潮 (gāo1 cháo2 = high-tide = orgasm), man 射精 (shè4 jìng1 = shoots/ejaculates semen/sperms), woman’s 卵 (luàn3 = ovum) 受精 (shòu4 jìng1 = receives semen/sperms = is fertilized).

養精蓄銳 (yǎng3 jīng1 xù4 rúi4 = raise-fine-soldiers-store-sharp-weapons) means conserving strength for later challenge/battle.

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