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

粉

Putonghua pronunciation: fen 3
Cantonese pronunciation: fan 2
Meanings: powder, rice noodle

粉 means powder: 麵粉 (mian4 fen3 = wheat-noodle-flour = wheat flour), 藥粉 (yao4 fen3 = medicine-powder), 粉紅 (fen3 hong2 = powder/pastel-red = pink). 粉碎 (fen3 sui4 = powder-split) means shatter. Actors 粉墨登場 (fen3 mo4 deng1 chang3 = powder-ink/paint-mount-stage = wear makeup, go/perform on stage).

麪 (mian4, radical 麥 mai4 = wheat/barley) is wheat-noodles, 粉 (radical 米 mi3 = rice) is rice-noodles. 米粉 (mi2 fen3 = rice-rice-noodles) is rice vermicelli. Hong Kong people call spaghetti “意大利粉” (Yi4 Da4 Li4 fen3 = “Italy”-transliterated-rice-noodles).

Teahouses serve 河粉 (he2 fen3 = river-rice-noodle = flat rice-noodles): 牛肉炒河粉 (niu2 rou4 chao3 he2 = cow-meat-stir-fried-rice-noodles = beef and rice-noodles stir-fried), 腸粉 (chang2 fen3 = intestine-rice-noodles = rice-powder lasagna).

by Diana Yue