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

卵 (luan 3)
Cantonese pronunciation: lun 5
Meanings: egg, ovum, ova

Putonghua pronunciation: luan 3

Women's 卵巢 (luan3 chao2 = egg/ovum/ova-nests = ovaries) release 卵子 (luan3 zi0 = ovum/ova-diminutive = ova) during 排卵期 (pai2 luan3 qi1 = release-ova-period = ovulation period). 受精卵 (shou4 jing1 luan3 = receive-sperm-ovum = fertilized egg/ovum) becomes 胚胎 (pei1 tai1 = embryo-foetus = embryo).

卵 = 蛋 (dan4, bird’s egg): 卵生 (luan3 sheng1 = egg-born = ovipara/oviparous), 雞卵 (ji1 luan3 = chicken’s-egg), 蛋黃 (dan4 huang2 = egg-yellow/yolk), 蛋白 (dan4 bai2 = egg-white), 卵形 (luan3 xing2 = egg-shaped), 鴨卵石 (e2 luan3 shi2 = goose-egg-stone = pebble).

“覆巢之下，豈有完卵?” (fu4 chao2 zhi1 xia4, qi3 you3 wan2 luan3 = Overturned-nest-’s-below, -How-can-have-intact/unbroken-egg? = “How can there be survivors after this total destruction?”

by Diana Yue