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 Dragon Boat Festival

粽子
Putonghua pronunciation: zong4
Cantonese pronunciation: jung2
Meanings: leaf-wrapped rice-pudding

粽子 (radical 米 mi3, raw rice grain) = 粽子 (zong4 zi0 = rice-puddings-diminutive) are eaten at 端午節 (duan1 wu3 jie2 = begin-noon-festival = fifth day of fifth lunar month = Dragon Boat Festival).

裹粽子 (guo3 zong4 zi0 = wrap-rice-pudding = make these puddings) recipe: Spread 肉 (rou4, meat/pork), soaked 豆 (dou4, beans), soaked 糯米 (nuo4 mi3, glutinous-rice) on 竹葉 (zhu2 ye4 = bamboo-leaf) or 荷葉 (he2 ye4 = lotus-leaf), 包起來 (bao1 qi3 lai2 = wrap-up-come = wrap it up), 煲 (bao1, boil) until soft.

Ancients threw 裹蒸粽 (guo3 zheng1 zong4 = wrapped-steamed-puddings with meat) and 蓮蓉粽 (lian2 rong2 zong4 = sweetened-lotus-paste-puddings) into sea/river to commemorate 屈原 (Qü1 Yüan2)’s death. I’d rather eat them.