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 barbecues

炭
Putonghua pronunciation: tan4
Cantonese pronunciation: taan3
Meanings: carbon, charcoal

炭 (山 shan1, mountain over 火 huo3, fire) = carbon. 炭水化合物 (tan4 shui3 hua4 he2 wu4 = carbon-water-transform-merge-thing) = carbohydrate. Archaeologists date fossils/relics by 炭十四鑑定法 (tan4 shi4 si4 jian4 ding4 fa3 = carbon-14-(isotope)-check-determine-method = carbon-14 dating method). 炭 also means charcoal, made from 煤 (mei2, coal). Water-diluted 炭墨 (tan4 mo4 = charcoal-ink) is Chinese writing/painting medium. Western 炭筆畫 (tan4 bi3 hua4 = charcoal-pen-drawing) = charcoal sketch. Water filtration systems use 活性炭 (huo2 xing4 tan4 = alive/active-nature-carbon = activated carbon).

Picnickers grill/roast food over 炭爐 (tan4 lu2 = charcoal-grill/heater), 炭火 (tan4 huo3 = charcoal-fire). 雪中送炭 (xue3 zhong1 song4 tan4 = snow-in-deliver-charcoal = bringing fuel to snow-trapped house) is timely/appreciated aid.

by Diana Yue