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

Putonghua pronunciation: wei2
Cantonese pronunciation: wai4
Meanings: surround, enclose, encircle, encircled, besieged

Pictogram 圍 (radical □ wei2, country, surround) means 包圍 (bao1 wei2 = wrap-surround = encircle): 圍裙 (wei2 qun2 = surround-skirt = apron), 圍脖 (wei2 bo2 = surround-neck = 圍巾 (wei2 jin1 = wrapping-scarf), 圍欄 (wei2 lan2 = enclosing-fence), 圍牆 (wei2 qiang2 = enclosing-wall). Planets 圍繞 (wei2 rao3 = encircle-turn-around) the sun.


Having barbecue, we 圍爐夜話 (wei2 lu2 ye4 hua4 = surround-grill/fire-pot-night-talk = have night chat around grill/pit-fire).

by Diana Yue