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.

This week: Words about Chinese cuisine

Intransitive verb 蒸 = 蒸發 (zheng fa = steam-disperse = evaporate). In 炎蒸 (yan zheng = hot-stamy) weather, water-vapor 蒸騰 (zheng teng = evaporate-rise). 蒸氣機 (zheng qi ji = steam-vapor-machine) = steam engine. 蒸馏水 (zheng liu shui = evaporated-distilled-water) = distilled water.

Transitive verb 蒸 means steam-cooking food, preserving ingredients’ natural juices/flavors: 蒸魚 (zheng yu = steamed fish), 蒸蛋 (zheng dan = steamed egg-custard), 蒸蟹 (zheng xie = steamed crabs). 點心 (dian xin = Cantonese dim-sum = dot-heart = petite dumplings) are served in 蒸籠 (zheng long = steam-cage = round, lidded bamboo/aluminum steamers).

Missing/vanished persons (probably dead) are described as 人間蒸發 (ren jian zheng fa = people-territory-steam-disperse = evaporated from the human world).

by Diana Yue