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

麺 (mian)  (Putonghua, 4th tone), min (Cantonese, 6th tone)
Basic meaning: flour, noodles

麵粉 (mian fen = flour-powder) is made into 麵包 (mian bao = flour-pouch = bread), 意大利粉 (Yi Da Li fen = Italy-transliterated-noodles = spaghettis), 麵條 (mian tiao = flour-strips/strings = noodles).

煮麵 (zhu mian = boil/cook-noodles) requires 過冷河 (guo leng he = pass-through-cold-river = plunging boiled noodles into cold/iced water to steady texture). Noodle shops serve 雲吞麺 (yun tun mian = wonton noodles), 湯麺 (tang mian = soup-noodles = noodles in soup/broth), 炒麺 (chao mian = stir-fried noodles).

Chinese birthday parties serve 壽麺 (shou mian = longevity-noodles). 清湯掛麺 (qing tang gua mian = clear-soup-hanging-noodles) describes girl’s fresh, straight-haired look. 即食麺 (ji shi mian = instant-eat-noodles) describes today’s rash, non-thinking culture.