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 kitchens

Putonghua pronunciation: lu2
Cantonese pronunciation: lo4
Meaning: stove, furnace, oven, kiln, burner, grill, heater


Engineers design 鍋爐 (guo1 lu2 = pot-burner = boilers), 焚化爐 (fen2 hua4 lu2 = burn-transform-furnace = incinerators). 剛出爐 (gang1 chu1 lu2 = only-just-exit-oven) describes freshly-baked buns or latest news. 香爐 (xiang1 lu2 = incense-burner)’s moke helps meditation.

Kitchens have 爐灶 (lu2 zao4 = stove-range). Second-in-charge quits, 另起爐灶 (lin4 qi3 lu2 zao4 = elsewhere-build-stove-range = starts rival business/faction). 革命洪爐 (ge2 ming4 hong2 lu2 = change-fate-big-furnace = Revolution’s great furnace/influence) makes poet’s art 爐火純青 (lu2 huo3 chu3 qing1 = furnace-fire-pure-blue/green = utmost fine/pure).

by Diana Yue