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 drinking

湯
Putonghua pronunciation: tang1
Cantonese pronunciation: tong1
Meanings: hot water, hot liquid, soup, broth

湯 has radical 氵 (= 水 shui3, water). 湯池 (tang1 chi2 = hot-water-pool) = public hot baths. 赴湯蹈火 (fu4 tang1 dao3 huo3 = go-to-geyser-step-through-fire) = pursue mission, braving dangers.

Stews have rich 湯汁 (tang1 zhi1 = soup-juice = sauce/liquid). 湯菜 (tang1 cai4 = soup-dishes), 湯麪 (tang1 mian4 = soup-noodles) need good湯底 (tang1 di3 = soup-base), e.g. 雞湯 (ji1 tang1 = chicken-soup). Chinese doctors concoct 湯藥 (tang1 yao4 = liquid-medicine). New cabinet 換湯不換藥 (huan4 tang1 bu4 huan4 yao4 = change-liquid-no-change-medicine = won’t reform, only makes superficial/cosmetic changes).

Cantonese housewives often 煲老火湯 (bao1 lao3 huo3 tang1 = slow-boil-old-fire-soup = concoct nourishing broths). Colloquialism 飲湯 (yin3 tang1 = drink-soup) means enjoying family dinner/comfort.

by Diana Yue