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 cooking shows

師
Putonghua pronunciation: shì1
Cantonese pronunciation: sī1
Meanings: teacher, master, example, specialist

師 = teacher/specialist: 巫師 (wu1 shì1 = voodoo-master = shaman/sorcerer/wizard), 教師 (jiāo1 shì1 = teacher-school-master), 律師 (lü4 shì1 = law-master = lawyer), 法師 (fǎ3 shì1 = doctrine-master = priest/“reverend…”), 軍師 (jūn1 shì1 = army-master = army’s strategist) also means plan/courtship’s advisor. 老師 (lǎo3 shì1 = old/senior-teacher), 師傅 (shī1 fù4 = teacher-master = skilled mechanic) are also honorifics for teacher/supervisor/mentor.

Aspiring pianist follows 大師 (dà4 shì1 = great-master = maestro), believing 名師出高徒 (míng2 shì1 chū1 gāo1 tú2 = famous/distinguished-teacher-produces-fine-students).

Apprentice 拜師 (bài4 shì1 = honor-teacher = follows teacher/specialist) to become 廚師 (chú2 shì1 = kitchen-master = cook/chef). Self-made cooks 無師自通 (wu2 shì1 zì4 tōng1 = without-teacher-self-understand = acquires knowledge/skill without learning from anyone).

by Diana Yue