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

茶
Putonghua pronunciation: cha2
Cantonese pronunciation: cha4
Meanings: tea

茶 (radical 木 = 草 cao3, grass) = tea: 喝茶 (he1 cha2 = drink-tea), 熱茶 (re4 cha2 = hot-tea), 品茶 (pin3 cha2 = assess/sample-tea = taste/savor tea). Host 奉茶 (feng4 cha2 = bring/serve-tea) to guest. 茶道 (cha2 dao4 = tea-way/principle) = Japanese tea ceremony or tea-ism.

In 茶館 (cha2 guan3 = tea-houses), 茶客 (cha2 ke4 = tea-guests) enjoy 清茶 (qing1 cha2 = plain-tea), 茶點 (cha2 dian3 = tea-snacks), entertainment. Cantonese 飲茶 (yin3 cha2 = Cantonese yam2 cha4 = drink-tea) features tea, dim-sum. 飲凉茶 (yin2 liang2 cha2 = drink-cool-tea) = take herbal medicinal tea to cool/cleanse body heat/system.

人走茶凉 (ren2 zou3 cha2 liang2 = person-run/leave-tea-cool) means person/cadre no longer holding a position is immediately neglected.

by Diana Yue