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:

1. **1st tone:** 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2. **2nd tone:** 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3. **3rd tone:** 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4. **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: peng1
Cantonese pronunciation: paang1
Meanings: cook

烹 (radical ⼉ = water/fire) = 烹飪 (peng1 ren3 = cook-done) means cooking: 烹魚 (peng1 yu2 = cook-fish), 烹羊 (peng1 yang2 = cook-lamb), 烹茶 (peng1 cha2 = boil/brew-tea). 烹調 (peng1 tiao2 = cook-adjust-flavor) = cook skillfully.

Housewives study 烹飪書 (peng1 ren4 shu1 = cook-books), share 烹飪心得 (peng1 ren4 xin1 de2 = cook-done-heart-achieve = cooking tips). Avant-garde restaurants promote 分子烹飪 (fen4 zi3 peng1 ren2 = separate-seed-cook-done = molecular cuisine).

Philosopher 老子 (Lao2 Zi3 = Lao-zi, founder of Daoism)’s saying “治大國若烹小鮮” (zhi4 da4 guo2 ruo4 peng1 xiao3 xian1 = rule-big-state-as-if-cooking-small-fresh-fish) means “Ruling a country and cooking a small fish require the same principle (don’t give it too much turning/interference/change).”

by Diana Yue