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

Putonghua pronunciation: lu2
Cantonese pronunciation: lo4
Meanings: furnace, stove, oven, cooker, range

爐 (radical火 huo3, fire) = 火爐 (huo3 lu2 = fire-furnace), 鍋爐 (guo1 lu2 = pot-furnace = boiler), 煮食爐 (zhu3 shi2 lu2 = cook-eat-stove = cooking stove). Housewives use 電爐 (dian4 lu2, electric-stoves), 煤氣爐 (mei2 qi4 lu2 = coal-gas-stove = gas stoves), 微波爐 (wei1 bo1 lu2 = micro-wave-ovens).

爐火純青 (lu2 huo3 chun2 qing1 = furnace-fire-pure-blue) describes art/skill/intellect reaching finest/purest state. Poetic description 紅粉當爐 (hong2 fen3 dang1 lu2 = red-powder-facing-stove) describes eatery’s pretty lady-cook manning stoves and serving customers.

明爐燒烤 (ming2 lu2 shao1 kao3 = bright-stove/fire-burn-roast = high-flame barbecue) produces delicious Cantonese roast duck. 另起爐灶 (ling4 qi3 lu2 zao4 = separately-build-oven-stove) means quitting original group to start similar operation.

by Diana Yue