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

杯
Putonghua pronunciation: bei1
Cantonese pronunciation: booi1
Meanings: cup, glass

杯 (radical 木 mu4, wood) = 杯子 (bei1 zi0 = cup-diminutive) = cup: 水杯 (shui3 bui1 = water-glass), 茶杯 (cha2 bei1 = tea-cup), 酒杯 (jiu3 bei1 = wine/liquor-glass), 杯麵 (bei1 mian4 = cup-noodle). Drinkers 舉杯 (jü3 bei12 = raise-cup). Alcoholic 貪杯 (tan1 bei1 = wants/craves-cup), loves 杯中物 (bei1 zhong4 wu4 = cup-inside’s-thing, i.e. wine/liquor).

杯 is quantity measurement: 一杯咖啡 (yi1 bei1 ka1 fei11 = a cup-of-“coffee”-transliterated). 杯水車薪 (bei1 shui3 che1 xin1 = cup-of-water-cartload-of-firewood = hopelessly splashing cup of water on cartload of burning firewood) describes inadequate means/budget.

Suspicious person 杯弓蛇影 (bei1 gong1 she2 ying3 = cup-bow-snake-shadow = seeing wine-cup reflecting shape of a bow, thinks he is seeing a snake).

by Diana Yue