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

演 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) means changing/evolving/acting. 演員 (yan3 yuan2 = actors) 演繹 (yan3 xi4 = act-drama = act/perform), 演繹 (yan3 yi4 = deduce-interpret = interpret) roles.

烹飪節目 (peng1 ren4 jie2 mu4 = cook-well-section-item = cooking programs) on TV are 表演 (biao3 yan3 = surface-act = shows). Chefs 做秀 (zuo4 xiu4 = do-“show”-transliterated = put on a show), 演出 (yan3 chu1 = act-out = perform/demonstrate) cooking techniques: 切 (qie4, cut/slice), 醃 (yan1, marinate), 蒸 (zheng1, steam), 煮 (zhu3, boil), 煎 (jian1, shallow-fry), 炒 (chao3, stir-fry/sauté), 炸 (zha4, deep-fry).

Foodies love to 扮演 (ban4 yan3 = impersonate-act = play/impersonate) restaurant customers, enjoy 高級烹飪 (gao1 ji2 peng1 ren4 = high-class-cook-well = high-class/sophisticated/expensive cooking = haute cuisine).

by Diana Yue