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 Hong Kong food

湯
Putonghua pronunciation: tang 1
Cantonese pronunciation: tong 1
Meanings: hot liquid, soup

湯 (radical 氵/水 shui3, water) + 火 (huo3, fire) = 燙 (tang4, effect of hot liquid). Hot soup 漯口 (tang4 kou3 = burns-mouth).
Restaurants serve 老火湯 (lao2 huo3 tang1 = old-fire-soup = slow-cooked rich soup), 例湯 (li4 tang1 = routine-soup = today’s soup). Set dinners are 四菜一湯 (si4 cai4 yi1 tang1 = four-vegis/dishes-a-soup).

Cantonese housewives 煲靚湯 (Cantonese bo1 liang4 tong1 = slow-cook-lovely/delicious-soup), keep husbands home to 飲湯 (yin3 tang1 = drink-soup = enjoy home-made soup and domestic comfort). In Hong Kong, bouillabaisse is called “海龍王湯” (hai3 long2 wang2 tang1 = “sea-dragon-king-soup”).

Drinking 頭啖湯 (tou2 dan4 tang1 = first-mouthful-of-soup) means capturing the first round of success and profits ahead of others.

by Diana Yue