

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 燙口 (*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.