

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 the tastes

(radical 鹵 *lu* = soy-sauce marinade)

Putonghua pronunciation: *xian* 2

Meaning: salty

鹽 (*yan* 2 = salt), 豉油 (*shi you* 42 = fermented-soy-bean-oil = soy sauce), 蠔油 (*hao you* 22 = oyster-oil/sauce) give 鹹味 (*xian wei* 24 = salty-taste). Chinese people eat 鹹魚 (*xian yu* 22 = salt-fish), 鹹蛋 (*xian dan* 24 = salty-egg = salt-preserved duck's eggs). Fish/crustaceans are abundant at 鹹淡水交界 (*xian dan shui jiao jie* 24314 = salty-unsalty-water-cross-border = where sea-water meets river-water).

Cantonese colloquial term 鹹濕 (*xian shi* 21 = Cantonese *haam sap* 41 = salty-wet) describes men's lusty thoughts/looks/gestures/words/actions or pornography.

品味 (*pin wei* 34 = appreciate-taste) = taste/discernment for food/art/clothes. 倒翻五味架 (*dao fan wu wei jia* 31344 = tumble-upset-five-tastes-stand = upset condiments) means overwhelmed by mixed jealous/angry/bitter/sad feelings.

by Diana Yue