

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 spring cleaning



Putonghua pronunciation: *sao3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *so3*

Meanings: brush, sweep

Ideogram 掃 = 扌 (= 手 *shou3*, hand/arm) + 帚 (*zhou3*, broom). 婦 (*fu4*, women) do housework, 掃地 (*sao3 di4* = sweep-the-floor), hence characters 婦 and 掃 both contain 帚 (= 掃帚 = *sao3 zhou3* = sweeping-broom). 大掃除 (*da4 sao3 chu2* = big-sweep-remove) = big-scale clean-up of rubbish/clutter.

Police 掃蕩 (*sao3 dang4* = sweep-sway/wash = raid) vice dens, 掃射 (*sao3 she4* = sweep-shoot = conduct high-speed firing/strafing on) criminals. Tumor needs 掃瞄 (*sao3 miao2* = sweep-watch = scanning). Lavish tourists 掃貨 (*sao3 huo4* = sweep-up-goods = buy like crazy), otherwise 掃興 (*sao3 xing4* = sweep-away-enjoyment = feel disappointed).

Idiom 各家自掃門前雪 (*ge2 jia1 zi4 sao3 men2 qian2 xue3* = each-family-self-sweep-door-front-snow) means coldly/selfishly ignoring/dismissing neighbors'/others'/affairs/ troubles.

by Diana Yue