

Character Builder

您好學？

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 Lent

齋

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhai1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jaai1*

Meaning: spiritual abstinence, fasting, abstain from meat, wine etc., vegetarian diet

齋 (radical 示 = 示 *shen2*, god/spiritual) means 素 (*su4*, plain/vegetarian), opposite of 葷 (*hun1*, strong-flavoured/meat). 吃齋 (*chi1 zhai1* = 吃素 *chi1 su4* = eat-vegetarian) means eat 齋菜 (*zhai1 cai4* = vegetarian-dishes). Religious devotees practice 齋戒沐浴 (*zhai1 jie4 mu4 yu4* = fasting-abstinence-bathing-ablution).

Religious practice 守齋 (*shou3 zhai1* = observe-abstinence) means 禁食 (*jin4 shi2* = forbid-eat = abstinence from food, i.e. fasting). Muslims fast during 齋月 (*zhai1 yue4* = fasting-month = Ramadan). Buddhists denounce killing of lives, advocate 吃長齋 (*chi1 chang2 zhai1* = eat-long-vegetarian = always eat vegetarian).

Christians observe 大齋期 (*da4 zhai1 qi1* = big-fasting-period = Lent), which lasts for approximately six weeks before 復活節 (*fu2 huo2 jie2* = again-live-festival = Easter Day).

by Diana Yue