

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 San Francisco

Putonghua pronunciation: *jin1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gam1*

Meaning: gold, metal, money

Radical 金 indicates 金屬 (*jin1 shu2* = gold-kind = metals): 銀 (*yin2*, silver), 銅 (*tong2*, copper), 鐵 (*tie3*, iron) or metalware-related actions: 鑿 (*zao2*, chisel), 鑽 (*zhuan4*, screw).

金錢 (*jin1 qian2* = gold-coin/money) means money. 美金 (*Mei3 jin1* = American-gold/money) = US dollars. 金礦 (*jin1 kuang4* = gold-mines) produce 黃金 (*huang2 jin1* = yellow-gold = gold). 金條 (*jin1 tiao2* = gold-bars) are 實金 (*shi2 jin1* = solid-gold). Blondes have 金髮 (*jin1 fa3* = golden-hair). 拜金 (*bai4 jin1* = worship-gold) means materialism/mammonism.

三藩市 (*San1 Fan1 Shi4*, "San Francisco"-transliterated)'s old name is 舊金山 (*Jiu4 Jin1 Shan1* = literally "old-gold-mountain"). "金山伯" (*Jin1 Shan1 bo2* = gold-mountain-uncles) means America's earlier generations of Chinese male migrant-workers.

by Diana Yue