

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 precious stones

Putonghua pronunciation: *shan3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sim2*

Meanings: flash, flicker, glitter, gleam

閃 shows 人 (*ren2*, person) slipping inside 門 (*men2*, door), hence means flash or quickly evade. 閃電 (*shan3 dian4* = flash~electricity) = lightning. Lights 閃耀 (*shan3 yao4* = glitter~shine). 靈光一閃 (*ling2 guang1 yi1 shan3* = spiritual-light~one~flash) = bright idea flashes across mind.

Pedestrian 閃避 (*shan3 bi4* = flash~avoid = darts away from) crashing car. Liar 閃爍其詞 (*shan3 shuo4 qi2 ci2* = flicker~scintillate~those~words = speaks evasively). 閃閃縮縮 (*shan3 shan3 suo1 suo1* = flash~flash~shrink~shrink) describes coward/thief's timid/stealthy movements.

金光閃閃 (*jin1 guang1 shan3 shan3* = gold~light~flash~flash) describes blonde hair. Gem-stones 閃光 (*shan3 guang1* = flash~brightness = glitter). 閃山雲 (*shan3 shan1 yun2* = glitter~hill~cloud = opal) is 半寶石 (*ban4 bao3 shi2* = semi~precious~stone).

by Diana Yue