

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 San Francisco



Putonghua pronunciation: *shan1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *saan1*

Meaning: hill, mountain

山 means hill/mountain: 高山 (*gao1 shan1* = tall-mountain), 雪山 (*xue3 shan1* = snowy-peak), 冰山 (*bing1 shan1* = ice-berg), 火山 (*huo3 shan1* = fire-mountain = volcano), 爬山 (*pa2 shan1* = climb-mountain = mountaineering). Radical 山 indicates hilly features: 峰 (*feng1*, peak), 嶺 (*ling3*, range).

山民 (*shan1 min2* = mountain-people) = rustics. 山河 (*shan1 he2* = hills-rivers) means country's expansive territory/ landscapes. 青山不老 (*qing1 shan1 bu4 lao3* = blue-green-hills- no-old/age) praises timeless landscape or person's perennial spirit/youthfulness.

金山銀山 (*jin1 shan1 yin2 shan1* = gold-mountain-silver-mountain) means inexhaustible wealth. San Francisco's old Chinese name 舊金山 (*Jiu4 Jin1 Shan1* = literally "old-gold-mountain") yielded term "金山伯" (*Jin1 Shan1 bo2* = gold-mountain-uncles, America's earlier generations of Chinese male migrant-workers).

by Diana Yue