

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 mahjong

Putonghua pronunciation: *si4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sei3*

Meanings: four

四 = four: 四方形 (*si4 fang1 xing2* = four~sided~form = quadrangle), 四周 (*si4 zhou1* = four~rim = surroundings), 四歲 (*si4 sui4* = four~years old), 四季 (*si4 ji4* = four~seasons).

四份一 (*si4 fen4 yi1* = four~parts~one) = a quarter. 第四 (*di4 si4* = order~four) = fourth. 四月 (*si4 yue4* = fourth~moon/month) = April. 不三不四 (*bu4 san1 bu4 si4* = neither~three~nor~four) describes person/work/words that are not pertinent, not good enough, not decent.

Idiom 四面楚歌 (*si4 mian4 chu3 ge1* = four~side~Chu-state's~songs) means surrounded by enemy's armies, soon to be vanquished. 攻打四方城 (*gong1 da3 si4 fang1 cheng2* = attack~beat~four~sided~city/citadel) means playing mahjong – players arrange mahjong tiles in four rows before starting the game.