

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 feeling miserable

Putonghua pronunciation: *men1, men4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *moon6*

Meanings: stuffy, pent-up, stifling, boredom

悶 (門 *men2*, doors trapping 心 *xin1*, heart) means pent-up/boring/bored: 悶熱 (*men1 re4* = stuffy/hot), 悶雷 (*men4 lei2* = pent-up~thunder = dry thunder), 沉悶 (*chen2 men4* = sunk~enclosed = boring). Stalemate is 悶局 (*men4 ju2* = deadlock/boring~situation). Cooking term 燜 (火 *huo3*, fire + 悶 *men4*, enclosed) = cook/stew in covered pot.

吃悶棍 (*chi4 men4 gun4* = eat/get~stifling~stick's-blow) = receive rude retort/hit-back. Chess-player's odd move makes opponent 納悶 (*na4 men4* = get~bored/puzzled): 悶葫蘆裡賣什麼藥 (*men4 hu2 lu2 li3 mai4 shen2 me0 yao4* = Tightly-lidded-gourd~inside~sell~what-medicine = What's he up to?)

Disillusioned dreamer 悶悶不樂 (*men4 men4 bu4 le4* = bored-bored-not~happy = feels low), cannot dispel 苦悶 (*ku3 men4* = bitter~boredom = weariness/ennui).

by Diana Yue