

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 blossoming trees

梅

Putonghua pronunciation: *mei2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *mooi4*

Meaning: plum

梅 (radical 木 *mu4*, wood/tree) = 梅花 (*mei2 hua1* = plum-flowers/blossoms), China's 國花 (*guo2 hua1* = national-flower). Chinese enjoy 賞梅 (*shang3 mei2* = viewing-plum-blossoms): 冬梅 (*dong1 mei2* = winter-blooming-plum-trees), 春梅 (*chun1 mei2* = spring-blooming-plum-trees). 梅乾 (*mei2 gan1* = plum-dry) = desiccated plum. Japanese umeshu is 梅酒 (*mei2 jiu3* = plum-liqueur/wine).

梅開二度 (*mei2 kai1 er4 du4* = plum-tree-blooms-two-times) describes twice-happening good thing, e.g. foot-baller scoring second goal. But 望梅止渴 (*wang4 mei2 zhi3 ke3* = look-at-plum-trees-stop/quench-thirst) means placating oneself/others with distant hopes/promises.

暗香疏影 (*an4 xiang1 shu1 ying3* = subdued-fragrance-sparse-shadows) typically describes sparsely-flowered, faintly-fragrant sprig of plum-blossoms. Forest of plum-trees yielding white flowers is 香雪海 (*xiang1 xue3 hai3* = fragrant-snowy-sea = fragrant sea of snow).

by Diana Yue