

Character Builder

您好嗎? 呀

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 eggs

殼

Putonghua pronunciation: *ke2, qiao4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *hok3*

Meanings: shell, curved hard over, crust

殼 (radical 士 *shi4*), pronounced *ke2* or *qiao4*, means shell: 貝殼 (*bei4 ke2* = molluscs-shell = seashells), 蝦殼 (*xia1 ke2* = prawn-shells), 蟹殼 (*xie4 ke2* = crab-shells), 硬殼果 (*ying4 ke2 guo3* = hard-shelled-fruit = nuts). To eat hard-boiled egg, crack 蛋殼 (*dan4 ke2* = egg-shell).

地殼運動 (*di4 qiao4 yun4 dong4* = earth-crust-act-move = movements of Earth's crust) cause earthquakes/tsunamis. 腦殼 (*nao3 ke2* = brain-crust) means brain/cranium/skull. Life having 軀殼 (*qu1 qiao4* = body-shell/enclosure = body) but no 靈魂 (*ling2 hun2* = spirit-soul = soul) means life lacking freedom/stimulus/purpose/joy.

金蟬蛻殼 (*jin1 chan2 tui4 qiao4* = golden-cicada-molt-from-shell = cicada pupa emerging from cocoon as adult insect) describes clever strategy of deceiving and slipping away from enemy.

by Diana Yue