

Character Builder 您好學? 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 blossoming trees

桃

Putonghua pronunciation: *tao2*
Cantonese pronunciation: *to4*
Meaning: peach

桃 (radical 木 *mu4*, wood/tree) means 桃花 (*tao2 hua1* = peach-flower), 桃樹 (*tao2 shu4* = peach-tree), 桃子 (*tao2 zi0* = peach-son/diminutive = peach). 核桃 (*he2 tao2* = nucleus-peach) = walnut. 桃駁李 (*tao2 bo2 li3* = peach-grafted-to-plum) is nectarine's Chinese name.

桃李爭春 (*tao2 li3 zheng1 chun1* = peach-blossoms-plum-blossoms-vie-for-spring) describes flowering trees blossoming in springtime. 世外桃源 (*shi4 wai4 tao2 yuan2* = world-beyond-peach-stream-source) is Utopia discovered by fisherman rowing upstream amidst blooming peach-trees.

桃花眼 (*tao2 hua1 yan3* = peach-blossom-eyes) describes woman's sexy/luring eyes. 桃色事件 (*tao2 e1 shi4 jian4* = peach-color-event-item) = sex scandal. Idiom 斷袖分桃 (*duan4 xiu4 fen1 tao2* = slit-sleeve-sharing-peach) describes gay man quietly slitting sleeve to let beloved partner sleep.

by Diana Yue