

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: *hu2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *woo4*

Meanings: harmony, win

Noun 和 (*he2*) means harmony: 和平 (*he2 ping2* = harmony-level = peace), 講和 (*jiang3 he2* = talk-peace = agree to stop fighting).

In mahjong, 和 (pronounced *hu2*) means 和牌 (*hu2 pai2* = harmony-tiles), i.e. form 一手牌 (*yi1 shou3 pai2* = a-hand-of-tiles) with correct tile-combinations, so 和出了 (*hu2 chu1 le0* = wins-out-ed = win this game!)

和 (*hu2* = win game) is miswritten as 糊 (*hu2* = gruel), hence 食糊 (*shi2 hu2* = eat~gruel) also means win game. 雞糊 (*ji1 hu2* = chicken~gruel) is smallest win. Stakes escalate with 一番 (*yi1 fan1* = first-level-stakes), 二番 (*er2 fan1* = second-level-stakes), 三番 (*san1 fan1* = third-level-stakes), more complex tile-combinations. 滿糊 (*man3 hu2* = full/overflowing~gruel) is win yielding highest stakes.

by Diana Yue