

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 Dunhuang

洞

Putonghua pronunciation: *dong4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *dung6*

Meaning: hole, pit, cave, cavity, grotto

洞 (radical 讠) = 水 *shui3* means 洞穴 (*dong4 xue2* = hole/cavity-cave): 山洞 (*shan1 dong4* = mountain-cave), 水簾洞 (*shui3 lian2 dong4* = water-curtain-cave = cave shaded off by cascade), 狐狸洞 (*hu1 li1 dong4* = fox's-den/lair).

Machines 鑽洞 (*zhuān4 dong4* = drill-holes). Dentists treat 牙洞 (*ya2 dong4* = dental-cavities).

空洞 (*kong1 dong4* = empty-hole/vacuous) describes person/speech without substance. 窯洞 (*yao2 dong4* = kiln/-hole) = cave dwellings with internal brick/stone walls, common in NW China. 敦煌石窟 (*Dun1 Huang1 shi2 ku1* = Dunhuang's-stone-grottoes) are 岩洞 (*yan2 dong4* = rock-hole = caves dug into rock/cliff) housing Buddhist shrines, statues, murals. 藏經洞 (*cang2 jing1 dong4* = storing-sutras-caves) is where millennium-old Buddhist scriptures were discovered in 1900.

by Diana Yue