

Character Builder

您好學？

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

杏

Putonghua pronunciation: *xing4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *hang6*
Meaning: apricot

杏 (radical 木 *mu4*, wood/tree) = 杏花 (*xing4 hua1* = apricot-flower), 杏樹 (*xing4 shu4* = apricot-tree). 杏子 (*xing4 zi0* = apricot-son/diminutive = apricot) yields 杏仁 (*xing4 ren2* = apricot-kernel = almond). 杏仁餅 (*xing4 ren2 bing3* = apricot-kernel-cake) = almond biscuit. 杏仁茶 (*xing4 ren2 cha2* = almond-tea) is sweet soup made with ground/powdered almond. 杏林 (*xing4 lin2* = apricot-forest) means medical circle. Patient honors doctor who saved him with plaque carrying words “譽滿杏林” (*yü4 man3 xing4 lin2* = renown-fills-apricot-forest = “A physician of true distinction”).

杏眼圓睜 (*xing4 yan3 yüan2 zheng1* = apricot-eyes-round-stare) describes pretty woman's angry stare. 紅杏出牆 (*hong2 xing4 chu1 qiang2* = red-apricot-sprig-climbs-out/over-wall) describes wife having illicit affair.

by Diana Yue