

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 Hong Kong food

鮮

Putonghua pronunciation: *xian 1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sin 1*

Meanings: fresh, fresh rich flavor

鮮 = 魚 (*yu2*, fish) + 羊 (*yang2*, mutton/lamb). 鮮美 (*xian1 mei3* = fresh-lovely) describes fresh tasty food. 海鮮 (*hai3 xian1* = sea-fresh) = seafood. 河鮮 (*he2 xian1* = river-fresh) = river catch.

Markets sell 鮮魚 (*xian1 yu2* = fresh-fish), 鮮肉 (*xian1 rou4* = fresh-meat), 鮮菜 (*xian1 cai4* = fresh-vegetables), 鮮果 (*xian1 guo3* = fresh-fruit). Cooks add 味精 (*wei4 jing1* = taste-essence = MSG) to food to enhance 鮮味 (*xian1 wei4* = flavorsome-taste = flavor).

鮮花插在牛糞上 (*xian1 hua1 cha1 zai4 niu2 fen4 shang4* = fresh/pretty-flower-stuck-on-cow-dung-surface) describes pretty woman married/attached to ugly/dumb man. 旗幟鮮明 (*qi2 zhi4 xian1 ming2* = flag-banner-sharp-bright = flashing sharp-looking clearly-identifiable flags/banners) describes parties/newspapers showing obvious political stance.

by Diana Yue