

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 walls

Putonghua pronunciation: *qiang 2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *cheung 4*

Meanings: wall

牆壁 (*qiang2 bi4* = wall-wall) enclose houses/gardens/ fortresses: 磚牆 (*zhuān1 qiang2* = brick-walls), 石牆 (*shí2 qiang2* = stone-walls). Soldiers guard 城牆 (*chéng2 qiang2* = city-wall), 護城河 (*hù4 chéng2 hé2* = protect-city-river = moat). 紅牆綠瓦 (*hóng2 qiang2 lǜ4 wǎ3* = red-walls-green-roof-tiles) describes Chinese traditional architecture.

Jerusalem's 哭牆 (*kū1 qiang2* = cry-wall) = Wailing Wall. 柏林圍牆 (*bó2 lín2 wéi2 qiang2* = "Berlin"-transliterated-enclose-wall) = the Berlin Wall. 騎牆派 (*qí2 qiang2 pài4* = climb-wall-faction) describes wavering/opportunistic person.

Woman having extra-marital affair is 紅杏出牆 (*hóng2 xìng4 chū1 qiang2* = red-apricot-out-wall = sprig of red apricot blossoms growing over wall). “隔牆有耳!” (*gē2 qiang2 yǒu2 ěr3* = separated-wall-has-ears) = “Someone’s eavesdropping next door!”

by Diana Yue