

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 the digestive system

Putonghua pronunciation: *shǐ3*
Cantonese pronunciation: *si2*
Meanings: faeces, stool, shit

Ideogram 屎 shows unpleasant radical 尸 (= 屍 *shǐ1*, corpse) + 米 (*mǐ3*, rice). 屎尿 (*shǐ3 niào4* = faeces-and-urine) are synonymous with 大小便 (*dà4 xiǎo3 biàn4* = big-small~ convenience = nouns “stool, urine” or verbs “stool, urinate”). 放屁 (*fàng4 pì4* = release~fart) also means “Rubbish/bullshit!”

便血 (*biàn4 xuè3* = stool-blood) = blood in ulcer/piles patient’s 糞便 (*fèn4 biàn4* = faeces-convenience/stool). Before houses had flush toilets, faeces-collectors 倒糞 (*dào3 fèn4* = pour~faeces = take away faeces/excrements in buckets) before dawn. 化糞池 (*huà4 fèn4 chí2* = dissolve~faeces~pond) = septic tank.

臭屎 (*chòu4 shǐ3* = stinking~faeces) is revolting. But 莊子 (philosopher *Zhuang1-zi3*) says: 道在便溺 (*dào4 zài4 biàn4 niào4* = Tao-present-at-faeces-urine): “The Tao/Way manifests itself everywhere, even in excrements.”

by Diana Yue