

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 Hong Kong food

雞

Putonghua pronunciation: *ji 1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gai 1*

Meanings: chicken

公雞 (*gong1 ji1* = father/grandpa~chicken) = cock, 母雞 (*mu3 ji1* = mother~chicken) = hen, 小雞 (*xiao3 ji1* = little~chicken) = chicks. 鶴立雞群 (*he4 li4 ji1 qun2* = stork~standing-among~chicken~flock) describes outstanding person outshining others. 火雞 (*huo3 ji1* = fire~chicken) = turkey.

走地雞 (*zou3 di4 ji1* = run~ground~chicken) = free range chicken. To make 白斬雞 (*bai2 zhan3 ji1* = white~chopped~chicken = chicken steamed then chopped/pieced), use 活雞 (*huo2 ji1* = live~chicken = chicken freshly slaughtered), never 雪雞 (*xue3 ji1* = snow~chicken = frozen chicken).

Cantonese says “prostitutes/women 做雞” (*zuo4 ji1* = make/be/do~chicken = sell their bodies), “men 叫雞” (*jiao4 ji1* = call/order~chicken/call-girls/prostitutes), perhaps because in Putonghua 雞 sounds like 妓 (*ji4* = prostitute/whore).

by Diana Yue