

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 willow trees

柳

Putonghua pronunciation: *liu3*
Cantonese pronunciation: *lau5*
Meanings: willow tree

柳 (radical 木 *mu4*, tree/wood) = 柳樹 (*liu3 shu4* = willow~tree), aka 楊柳 (*yang2 liu3* = surname-Yang-willow). 垂柳 (*chui2 liu3* = droop~willow) = weeping willows. 柳煙 (*liu3 yan1* = willow~smoke) = light-green haze suggested by light-penetrable willow-leaves.

桃紅柳綠 (*tao2 hong2 liu3 lu4* = peach~red~willow~green) describes gay springtime. 柳浪聞鶯 (*liu3 lang4 wen2 ying1* = willow-waves~hear~oriole) = orioles singing among rippling willow-leaves. 柳眉 (*liu3 mei2* = willow~eye~brows), 柳腰 (*liu3 yao1* = willow~waist) describe pretty woman's arched brows, slender waist.

Men visit 花街柳巷 (*hua1 jie1 liu3 xiang4* = flowers~streets~willows~alleys = brothel districts), 尋花問柳 (*xun2 hua1 wen4 liu3* = seek~flowers~ask-for~willows = find prostitutes), contract 花柳病 (*hua1 liu3 bing4* = flowers~willows~disease = venereal diseases).

by Diana Yue