

Character Builder

您好學? 呀

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 barbecues

炭

Putonghua pronunciation: *tan4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *taan3*
Meanings: carbon, charcoal

炭 (山 *shan1*, mountain over 火 *huo3*, fire) = carbon. 炭水化合物 (*tan4 shui3 hua4 he2 wu4* = carbon-water-transform-merge-thing) = carbohydrate. Archaeologists date fossils/relics by 炭十四鑑定法 (*tan4 shi2 si4 jian4 ding4 fa3* = carbon-14-(isotope)-check-determine-method = carbon-14 dating method).

炭 also means charcoal, made from 煤 (*mei2*, coal). Water-diluted 炭墨 (*tan4 mo4* = charcoal-ink) is Chinese writing/painting medium. Western 炭筆畫 (*tan4 bi3 hua4* = charcoal-pen-drawing) = charcoal sketch. Water filtration systems use 活性炭 (*huo2 xing4 tan4* = alive/active-nature-carbon = activated carbon).

Picnickers grill/roast food over 炭爐 (*tan4 lu2* = charcoal-grill/heater), 炭火 (*tan4 huo3* = charcoal-fire), 雪中送炭 (*xue3 zhong1 song4 tan4* = snow-in-deliver-charcoal = bringing fuel to snow-trapped house) is timely/appreciated aid.

by Diana Yue