

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 marine life

軟

Putonghua pronunciation: *ruan3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yuen5*

Meanings: soft

軟 describes texture/feel: 柔軟 (*rou2 ruan3* = gentle~soft) fabric, 軟弱 (*ruan3 ruo4* = soft~weak = weak) voice/personality, 軟綿綿 (*ruan3 mian2 mian2* = soft~wool~wool = soft/spongy) voice/mattress/cake. After 軟禁 (*ruan3 jin4* = soft~imprison = house arrest), dissident's stand 軟化 (*ruan3 hua4* = soft~transform = softens/weakens).

軟體動物 (*ruan3 ti3 dong4 wu4* = soft~body~moving~things) = mollusks: 水母 (*shui3 mu3* = water~mother = jellyfish), 墨魚 (*mo4 yu2* = ink~fish = 烏賊, *wu1 zei2* = grey~thief = squid/cuttlefish), 八爪魚 (*ba1 zhao3 yu2* = eight~claws~fish = octopuses), 貝類 (*bei4 lei4* = seashell~species e.g. clams, cowries).

Clam yields 珍珠 (*zhen1 zhu1* = precious~pearls), is logo of 殼牌石油 (*ke2 pai2 shi2 you2* = shell~brand~stone~oil = Shell Petroleum).