

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 fiscal cliff



Putonghua pronunciation: *duo4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *doh6*
Meanings: drop, fall, sink, plunge

Ideogram 墮 shows person falling from slope onto 土 *tu3*, ground, means 下墮 (*xia4 duo4* = downwards-drop/fall): 墮樓 (*duo4 lou3* = fall-from/off-building), 墮海 (*duo4 hai3* = fall-into-sea), 墮崖 (*duo4 ya2* = fall-from/off-cliff).

Girl 誤墮陷阱 (*wu4 duo4 xian4 jing3* = mistake-fall-into-plunge-trap) = gets tricked/trapped by mistake, 墮入風塵 (*duo4 ru4 feng1 chen2* = fall-into-wind-dust = is stuck in shameful profession/life-style). 墮落 (*duo4 luo4* = fall-down) means sink into poverty/immorality. 墮胎 (*duo4 tai1* = drop-fetus) = abortion. 墮馬 (*duo4 ma3* = fall-from/off-horse) describes jockey's fall from horse or person/businessman who made mistake/wrong judgment and was out of the race. Regretting 墮入塵網 (*duo4 ru4 chen2 wang3* = fall-into-dust-net = life of worldly trappings), man turns monk/hermit.

by Diana Yue