

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 face

Putonghua pronunciation: *liǎn3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *lim5*

Meanings: face

臉 = 面孔 (*mian4 kong3* = face-hole/aperture) = face: 蘋果臉 (*ping2 guo3 liǎn3* = apple-fruit~face = apple-red face), 瓜子臉 (*gua1 zi0 liǎn3* = melon-seed~face = heart-shaped face). 臉紅 (*liǎn3 hong2* = face-red = blushing) reflects embarrassment/anger, 臉青 (*liǎn3 qing1* = face-turn-blue-green) reflects fear.

Snobs 愛面子 (*ai4 mian4 zi0* = love-face~diminutive = want face/respectability), hate 丟臉 (*diu4 liǎn3* = drop/losing-face). 臉皮厚 (*liǎn3 pi2 hou4* = face-skin~thick) means unabashed/unashamed, 不要臉 (*bu4 yao4 liǎn3* = no-want-face) means acting shamelessly. 反臉 (*fan2 liǎn3* = overturn-face) describes friends/partners quarrelling, breaking up.

臉譜 (*liǎn3 pu3* = face~drawings) are Chinese opera face-masks. Sichuan opera-singers perform 變臉 (*bian4 liǎn3* = change-face = changing face-masks at lightning speed).

by Diana Yue