

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 pearls



Putonghua pronunciation: *bei4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *boo3*

Meanings: mollusks, seashells, clam, pearl oyster

貝 means 貝類 (*bei4 lei4* = shellfish/mollusk~species) e.g. 蚌 (*bang4* = 蛤蜊 *ge2 li4* = clam), 牡蠣 (*mu3 li4* = 蠔 *hao2*, oyster). 扇貝 (*shan4 bei4* = fan~clam = scallop)'s dried meat is flavorsome 乾貝 (*gan1 bei4* = conpoy = dry~mollusk/scallop). 珠貝 (*zhu1 bei4* = pearl~molluscs) = clams/oysters which produce pearls. 貝母 (*bei4 mu3* = shell~mother = mother-of-pearl = nacre) is iridescent inner lining of 貝殼 (*bei4 ke2* = shell~crust/cover = seashells).

Ancient Chinese used seashells as currency, hence radical 貝 means wealth, e.g. 財寶 (*cai2 bao3* = wealth-treasures). 寶貝 (*bao3 bei4* = precious-seashell) means valuable gem/object, magical instrument or somebody's darling. Ludwig van Beethoven's name is transliterated into Chinese as 貝多芬 (*bei4 duo1 fen1*, literally "surname-Bei4~abundant~fragrance").

by Diana Yue