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 San Francisco

岸 Putonghua pronunciation: an4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngon6
Meaning: shore, bank, coast

岸 (radical 山 shan1) means high ground on water-edge: 海岸線 (hai3 an4 xian4 = sea/ocean-coast-line), 河岸 (he2 an4 = river-bank). Boat 班岸 (bo2 an4 = parks-by-shore), passengers 登岸 (deng1 an4 = go-on-shore). Artist paints 沿岸風景 (yuan2 an4 feng1 jin4 = along-shore-wind/custdoms-scene = coastal landscape).

Buddhists preach “苦海無邊, 回頭是岸” (ku3 hai3 wu2 bian1, hui2 tou2 shi4 an4 = sufferings-sea-no-end, turn-head-is-shore/land = life is all sorrow; repent, find rest/enlightenment). Paris’ River seine has 右岸 (you4 an4 = right-bank), 左岸 (zuo3 an4 = left-bank) where intellectuals gathered, yielding term 左傾 (zuo3 qing1 = left-leaning/“leftist”).

San Francisco is in 加州 (Jia1 zhou1 = "Cal"ifornia"-transliterated-state), on US’s 西岸 (xi1 an4 = west-coast).

by Diana Yue