Character Builder

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 drinking

酒
Putonghua pronunciation: jiu3
Cantonese pronunciation: jau2
Meanings: wine, liquor

酒 has radical 酒 (＝水 shui3, water). Restaurants serve 葡萄酒 (pu2 tao2 jiu3 = grape-wines), 清酒 (qing1 jiu3 = clear-liquor/wine = Japanese sake). Party host 祝酒 (zhu1 jiu3 = congratulate-wine = proposes toast). 酒店 (jiu3 dian4 = wine-shop) means hotel, not pub.


醉酒鬼 (zui4 jiu3 gui3 = drunken-wine/liquor-ghost) = guy who is drunk. 酒鬼 (jiu3 gui3 = wine/liquor-ghost) = alcoholic. 酒駕 (jiu3 jia4 = wine/liquor-drive-car = driving after drinking wine/liquor), 醉駕 (zui4 jia4 = drunken-drive-car = driving when drunk) are legal offences.

by Diana Yue