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 eggs

殼 (radical 卜 shi4), pronounced ke2 or qiao4, means shell:貝殼 (bei4 ke2 = molluscs-shell = seashells), 蝦殼 (xia1 ke2 = prawn-shells), 蟹殼 (xie4 ke2 = crab-shells), 硬殼果 (ying4 ke2 guo3 = hard-shelled-fruit = nuts). To eat hard-boiled egg, crack 蛋殼 (dan4 ke2 = egg-shell).

地殼運動 (di4 qiao4 yün4 dong4 = earth-crust-act-move = movements of Earth's crust) cause earthquakes/tsunamis. 腦殼 (nao3 ke2 = brain-crust) means brain/cranium/skull. Life having 軀殼 (qū1 qiao4 = body-shell/enclosure = body) but no 靈魂 (ling2 hun2 = spirit-soul = soul) means life lacking freedom/stimulus/purpose/purpose/joy.

金蟬蛻殼 (jin1 chan2 tui4 qiao4 = golden-cicada-molt-from-shell = cicada pupa emerging from cocoon as adult insect) describes clever strategy of deceiving and slipping away from enemy.

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