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 \ 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 kindergartens

啟
Putonghua pronunciation: qi3
Cantonese pronunciation: kai2
Meaning: initiate, start, begin, open, inaugurate, announce, letter, enlighten

啟 (radical 戶 hu4, door) means 開啟 (kai1 qi3 = open/start-open). 開門 (qi3 men2 = open-door), 開封 (qi3 feng1 = open-sealed-object). Ship 啟碇 (qi3 ding4 = lifts-anchor), 啟動 (qi3 dong4 = starts-moves) engine, 啟航 (qi3 hang2 = begins-sailing/voyage).

Theme-park posts 啟業啟事 (qi3 ye4 qi3 shi4 = start-operation-announce-event = opening/inauguration announcement), 啟用 (qi3 yong4 = starts-using) new roller-coasters. Boy loves girl but 羞於啟齒 (xiu1 yu1 qi3 chi3 = is too shy-to-open-teeth and tell her).

啟蒙 (qi3 meng2 = open-unconscious/ignorant) = enlightenment. Prophets get 啟示 (qi3 shi4 = initiated/inspired-manifestations). Kids should get 啟發 (qi3 fa1 = initiation-start = fresh ideas) from kindergarten's 啟蒙教育 (qi3 meng2 jiao4 yu4 = initial-teach-breed = initial/rudimentary education).

by Diana Yue