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 Chinese tonic medicines

藥 (radical 草 = 草 cao3, grass/herb) = 藥物 (yao4 wu4 = medicine-things = medicine/drug): 藥廠 (yao4 cang3 = phramaceutical-factory), 西藥 (xi1 yao4 = western-medicines), 中藥 (Zhong1 yao4 = Chinese-medicines). Roots of 人參 (ren2 sen1 = ginseng), 當歸 (dang1 gui1 = angelica sinensis) are 補藥 (bu3 yao4 = replenishing/invigorating-medicine) ingredients.

Doctors write 藥方 (yao4 fang1 = medical-prescriptions), 藥到病除 (yao4 dao4 bing4 chu2 = medicine-arrives/applied-illness-quickly-reliieved). But sage advises: 心病還須心藥醫 (xin1 bing4 hai2 xü1 xin1 yao4 yil = heart’s-illness-still-needs-heart’s-medicine-to-cure = heart’s woes/grudges need delicate psychological handling).

Wish your invaliding friend a speedy recovery by saying 早占勿藥 (zao3 zhan1 wu4 yao4 = early-forecast-no-medicine), elegant phrase meaning “Get off medication soon!”

by Diana Yue