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 fatty foods

消 (radical 氵 = 水 shui3, water) = shrinking/vanishing: 消瘦 (xiao1 shou4 = shrink-thin = become thin/emaciated), 消失 (xiao1 shi1 = vanish-gone), 消除 (xiao1 chu2 = cancel-remove), 取消 (qü3 xiao = take-cancel = cancel), 消滅 (xiao1 mie4 = eliminate-kill).

消極 (xiao1 ji2 = shrink-pole/ultimate) = passive/negative.

消費 (xiao1 fei4 = dispel-spend) = consume/consumption. Exercise 消耗 (xiao1 hao4 = dispel-waste = consumes/reduces) calories. 消長 (xiao1 zhang3 = shrink-or-grow) describes wax and wane of rivals’ power/fortune.

Body 吃不消 (chi4 bu4 xiao1 = eat-no/cannot-dispel = cannot stand) too much work/alcohol. 消化 (xiao1 hua4 = dispel-transform/melt) = digest/digestion. 消化不良 (xiao1 hua4 bu4 liang2 = digestion-no-good) = indigestion. Tea/vegetable can 消滞 (xiao1 zhi4 = dispel-sluggish-digestion = ease indigestion).

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