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 dental care

洞
Putonghua pronunciation: dong4
Cantonese pronunciation: dung6
Meanings: hole, pit, cavity

Noun 洞 (radical氵 = water shui3, water) indicates water-eroded hole/cavity: 岩洞 (yan2 dong4 = rock-hole = hole in rocky cliff), 洞口 (dong4 kou3 = hole-mouth = cave’s opening). Train 穿山洞 (chuan1 shan1 dong4 = pierce-hill-hole = passes through tunnel). Machine 鑽洞 (zhuan4 dong4 = drills-holes). 空洞無物 (kong1 dong4 wu2 wu4 = empty-hole-no-thing) describes empty speech/thinking.

Verb 洞 means penetrate/pierce. Nail 洞穿 (dong4 chuan1 = hole-pierce = pierces) wall. Analyst 洞察 (dong4 cha2 = hole-detect = detects/penetrates) problem. Seer 洞悉天機 (dong4 xi1 tian1 ji1 = hole-know-heaven-chance = perceives/understands heaven’s secret). However, 洞房 (dong4 fang2 = hole-room) means newly-weds spending first night in bed.

Poor oral hygiene causes 牙洞 (ya2 dong4 = dental-cavities).

by Diana Yue