

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 looking pretty



Putonghua pronunciation: *mei3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *mei5*

Meanings: beauty, beautiful

美 = good/beautiful/praiseworthy: 美食 (*mei3 shi2* = beautiful~food = gourmet food), 美景 (*mei3 jing3* = beautiful~scenery), 美女 (*mei3 nu3* = beautiful~women/girls), 美色 (*mei3 se1* = beautiful~color = woman's attractive looks). 美事 (*mei3 shi4* = beautiful~thing/event) means praiseworthy event/act e.g. successful rescue of Chilean miners.

Women 愛美 (*ai4 mei3* = love~beauty = want to look pretty), buy 美麗 (*mei3 li4* = beautiful~pretty) clothes, visit 美容院 (*mei3 rong2 yuan4* = beauty~visage~house = beauty parlor).

國色天香 (*guo2 se1 tian1 xiang1* = state's~color~heaven's~aroma) describes extremely beautiful woman. 紅顏薄命 (*hong2 yan2 bao2 ming4* = red~visage~thin~life/fate) laments lovely woman's tragic fate. Saying 美人禍水 (*mei3 ren2 huo4 shui3* = beautiful~person~disaster~water) is attributing cause of misfortune/war/defeat to femme fatale.

by Diana Yue