

Character Builder

您好嗎? 呀

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 hams

肥

Putonghua pronunciation: *fei2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *fei4*

Meanings: fat, corpulent

肥 (radical 月 = 肉, *rou4*, meat) means fleshy/fat/rich. Volcanic soil is肥沃 (*fei2 wo4* = fat-irrigated = rich). 減肥 (*jian3 fei2* = subtract-fat) = reduce weight/measurements. 肥缺 (*fei2 que4* = fat-lack/unfilled-opening) = post promising rich under-table gleanings. 挑肥揀瘦 (*tiao1 fei2 jian3 shou4* = select-fat-choose-lean) describes choosy people.

In Cantonese, fat people are facetiously/rudely called 肥佬 (Cantonese *fei4 lo2* = fat-men), 肥婆 (Cantonese *fei4 poh4* = fat-women). 肥騰騰 (Cantonese *fei4 tang4 tang4* = fat-rise-rise) describes bulging/rippling bellies or fatty/oily meat. Hong Kong colloquialism 肥佬 (*fei4 lo2*) means fail (from “fail”-transliterated).

Gourmets love 肥叉燒 (*fei2 cha1 shao1* = fat-fork-burn/roast = fat barbecued pork), 肥火腿 (*fei2 huo3 tui3* = fat-fire-leg = fatty parts of ham).

by Diana Yue