

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 obesity

肥

Putonghua pronunciation: *fei2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *fei4*

Meanings: fat, rich, enrich

肥 = 肥胖 (*fei2 pang4* = fat~plump). 胖子 (*pang4 zi0* = fat~diminutive) means fat people/men. Over-eating causes 過胖 (*guo4 pang4* = over/too~fat = obesity).

In Cantonese, calling people “肥佬” (*fei4 lo2* = fat~man), “肥婆” (*fei2 poh4* = fat~woman) is rude/facetious, implying fat/plump people are 難看 (*nan2 kan4* = difficult~to-look-at = ugly). However, fashionable women in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) 以肥為美 (*yi3 fei2 wei2 mei3* = use~fat~as~beauty = consider fat/plump as beautiful). 豐乳肥臀 (*feng1 ru3 fei2 tuan2* = rich/bulging~breasts~fat/large~bottom) describes a woman/mother's voluptuous body.

膘肥 (*biao1 fei2* = fat/rump~fat) describes meaty/strong horses/cattle. 肥美 (*fei2 mei3* = fat-beautiful = fertile/rich) soil does not need 肥料 (*fei2 liao4* = fattening~material = fertilizers).

by Diana Yue