

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 corruption



(radical 貝 *bei4* = sea-shell/money)

Putonghua pronunciation: *tan1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *taam1*

Meanings: love excessively, covet, greed

Motive 貪 is 貪念 (*tan1 nian4* = greedy-thought). Lazy pigs 貪吃 貪睡 (*tan1 chi4 tan1 shui4* = love~eat~love~sleep). 貪心 (*tan1 xin1* = greed~heart = greedy) people always want more. The Ten Commandments say: “不可貪婪!” (*bu4 ke3 tan1 lan2* = no~permit~greed~greed = “Thou shalt not covet!”)

Misers 貪錢 (*tan1 qian2* = greed~money = want/love money). Cowards 貪生怕死 (*tan1 sheng1 pa4 si3* = covet~life~fear~death = fear danger/risks). The term 貪污 (*tan1 wu1* = greed-dirt = corruption) comes from 貪官污吏 (*tan1guan1 wu1 li4* = greedy-officials-dirty-clerks = corrupt officials).

Character 貪 and character 貧 (*pin2*, poverty) look alike, hence idiom 貪字變貧 (*tan1 zi4 bian4 pin2* = greed~character~change-to~poverty): Greed can turn into poverty!