

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 false hopes

梅

Putonghua pronunciation: *mei2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *mooi4*

Meanings: Chinese plum

梅 (Chinese plum, Latin *prunus mume*, Japanese name “ume”) is tree bearing 梅花 (*mei2 hua1* = Chinese-plum~blossom) which symbolizes elegance/purity/perseverance. In winter/spring, hikers 踏雪尋梅 (*ta4 xue3 xun2 mei2* = step~snow~search~plum = search for blossoming plum-trees in snow).

Plum-tree bears 梅子 (*mei2 zi3* = plum~son/fruit = plum-fruit) in early summer. 酸梅湯 (*suan1 mei2 tang1* = sour~plum~soup = sugared plum juice) is a cold summer drink.

Botanically distinguished from 梅, 蠟梅 (*la4 mei2* = wax~plum~flower = Latin *chimonanthus praecox* = wintersweet, also called 臘梅 *la4 mei2* = 12th-month~plum~flower), has flowers yellow like 蜜蠟 (*mi4 la4* = honey~wax = beeswax/non-transparent-amber). Its buds, used in Chinese medicine, can 解暑生津 (*jie3 shu3 sheng1 jin1* = relieve~summer-heat~produce~saliva = relieve fevers/thirst).

by Diana Yue