

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 fish

潛

Putonghua pronunciation: *qian2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chim4*

Meanings: sink, dive, submerge, hide, secretive, latent, potential

潛 (radical 氵 = 水 *shui3*, water) means dive/hide. Fish 浮 (*fu2*, float), 潛 (*qian2*, dive) using swim-bladder. Pearl-fishers 潛水 (*qian2 shui3* = dive-under-water). 潛艇 (*qian2 ting3* = dive-boat) = submarine/U-boat. 沉潛 (*chen2 qian2* = sink~dive) describes non-showy/steady personality. 潛意識 (*qian2 yi4 shi1* = potential~idea-awareness) = subconscious.

Suspect 潛逃 (*qian2 tao2* = secretly~escapes/absconds). Spy 潛伏 (*qian2 fu2* = lurks~hides). Infectious disease has 潛伏期 (*qian2 fu2 qi1* = submerge~hide~period = symptom-less latency period). 潛台詞 (*qian2 tai2 ci2* = hidden~stage~words) means stage-play/plan's unspoken lines/agenda.

Under teacher's 潛移默化 (*qian2 yi2 mo4 hua4* = hidden~move~silent~transform = subtle influence), student with 潛力 (*qian2 li4* = potential~ability) 潛心讀書 (*qian2 xin1 du2 shu1* = dive~heart~read~books = studies steadily/concentratedly).