

# 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 rice-planting

Putonghua pronunciation: *miao2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *miu4*

Meanings: seedling, young shoot

Character 苗 = 艹 (= 草 *cao3*, grass) + 田 (*tian2*, field): 草苗 (*cao3 miao2* = grass's~young-shoot), 樹苗 (*shu4 miao2* = tree's~sapling), 秧苗 (*yang1 miao2* = rice-seedling~young-shoot). 幼苗 (*you4 miao2* = young~shoots) are bred in 苗圃 (*miao2 pu3* = seedling~plant-bed), 溫室 (*wen1 shi4* = warm~room = greenhouse). Hong Kong has 護苗基金 (*hu3 miao2 ji1 jin1* = protect~seedlings~foundation~gold/money = End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation).

Chinese peasants celebrate 禾苗節 (*he2 miao2 jie2* = grain-crops~seedlings~festival) in July. 跳秧歌 (*tiao4 yang1 ge1* = dance~grain-crop~young-shoots~song) in western China is colorful percussion-accompanied peasant song-dance.

有苗頭 (*you3 miao2 tou2* = has~seedlings~head) describes promising person/project. Idiom 拔苗助長 (*ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3* = pull~seedlings~help~grow-up) describes over-eager/radical help that kills project.

by Diana Yue