

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 water

Putonghua pronunciation: *shui3*
Cantonese pronunciation: *sui2*
Meanings: water, liquid, fluid

水 (= radicals 氵, 冫, 雨) forms 海 (*hai3*, sea), 雲 (*yün2*, clouds), facilitates 洗 (*xi3*, washing), 蒸 (*zheng1*, steaming). Interaction of 水木火土金 (*shui3 mu4 huo3 tu3 jin1* = water, wood, fire, earth, metal) forms Chinese philosophical concept 五行 (*wu3 xing2* = five-elements).

Nature demonstrates 金生水 (*jin1 sheng1 shui3* = metal~engenders~water: metal contains water), 水生木 (*shui3 sheng1 mu4* = water~engenders~wood: nourishes plants). So, gardeners 澆花 (*xiao1 hua1* = waters~flowers).

土剋水 (*tu3 ke1 shui3* = earth~suppresses/absorbs~water), 水剋火 (*shui3 ke1 huo3* = water~suppresses/extinguishes water). So, 兵來將擋, 水來土掩 (*bing1 lai2 jiang4 dang3, shui3 lai2 tu3 yan3* = soldiers~come~knight~stops~them, water~comes~earth~covers~it): When enemy/calamity strikes, just fight it!

by Diana Yue