

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 dragons

潛

Putonghua pronunciation: *qian2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chin2*

Meanings: dive, unsurfaced, latent, potential, secretly

潛 (radical 冫 = 水 *shui3*, water) = dive/submerge: 潛在 (*qian2 zai4* = submerged-exist = unsurfaced/hidden), 潛力 (*qian2 li4* = hidden-power/potential). Psychiatrist analyzes patient's 潛意識 (*qian2 yi4 shi1* = hidden-idea-awareness = subconscious).

Pearlers 潛水 (*qian2 shui3* = submerge~water = skin-dive). Sonar detects 潛艇 (*qian2 ting3* = dive~boat = submarines). Police mole 潛伏 (*qian2 fu2* = submerged~crouch = hide) among gangsters. 007 潛入敵境 (*qian2 ru4 di2 jing4* = move~stealthily~into~enemy's~territory). Wanted criminals 潛逃 (*qian2 tao2* = secretly~escape).

Monks/nuns 潛修 (*qian2 xiu1* = submerged~practice = study/meditate quietly/seriously). 沉潛 (*chen2 qian2* = sink/heavy~dive/deep) describes a low-key person with depth/firmness of character. 潛龍 (*qian2 long2* = submerged~dragon) means someone whose rare political genius is not yet known/appreciated by the world.

by Diana Yue