

# 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 *Journey to the West*

西

Putonghua pronunciation: *xi1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sai1*

Meanings: west

In Chinese world-view, China is 中國 (*Zhong1 Guo2* = Middle-Kingdom), Japan is 東洋 (*dong1 yang2* = eastern-ocean), Europe/America is 西洋 (*xi1 yang2* = western-ocean). 西化 (*xi1 hua4* = west-transform = westernized) Chinese wear 西服 (*xi1 fu* = western-clothes), enjoy 西餐 (*xi1 can1* = western-dishes/cooking).

In novel *Journey to the West*, Tripitaka travelled westwards across 西域 (*Xi1 Yu4* = Western-Regions, today's 新疆 *Xin1 Jiang1* = Xinjiang) to 西天 (*xi1 tian1* = western-heaven), i.e. India, where 佛教 (*fo2 jiao4* = Buddha-religion = Buddhism) flourished.

Buddhists believe people go to 西方極樂世界 (*xi1 fang1 ji2 le4 shi4 jie4* = west-direction-ultimate-happiness-world-border = Western Paradise) after death. 一命歸西 (*yi1 ming4 gui1 xi1* = one-life-returns-west) means someone dies.

by Diana Yue