

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 Madame White Snake

蛇

Putonghua pronunciation: *she2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *se4*

Meanings: snake

In Chinese mythology, god 伏羲 (*Fu2 Xi1*) and goddess 女媧 (*Nu3 Wa1*) are 人首蛇身 (*ren2 shou3 she2 shen1* = human-head-snake-body). 蛇 is one of 十二生肖 (*shi2 er4 sheng1 xiao4* = ten-two-birth-resemblance = twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac).

Christians say 毒蛇 (*du2 she2* = poisonous~snake) is 撒但 (*Sa1 Dan4* = “Satan”-transliterated), 魔鬼 (*mo2 gui3* = demon-ghost = the Devil). 蛇頭 (*she2 tou2* = snake-head) trades 人蛇 (*ren2 she2* = persons-snake = illegal immigrants). Verb 蛇王 (*she2 wang2* = snake-king) in Hong Kong lingo means sneaking out from work.

白蛇 (*bai2 she2* = white~snake) and 青蛇 (*qing1 she2* = bluish-green~snake) are heroines of Chinese myth 白蛇傳 (*bai2 she2 zhuan4* = white~snake-legend).