

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 Mid-Autumn Festival

明

Putonghua pronunciation: *ming 2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ming 4*

Meanings: bright, clear

明 = 日 (*ri 4*, sun) + 月 (*yue 4*, moon): 明月 (*ming 2 yue 4* = bright-moon), 明星 (*ming 2 xing 1* = bright-star/movie-star), 明亮 (*ming 2 liang 4* = brightly~lit). “明白!” (*ming 2 bai 2* = clear~white) means “Understand!”

光明 (*guang 1 ming 2* = brightness/light) is opposite of 黑暗 (*hei 1 an 4* = black~dark = darkness). Ancient Persia’s 拜火教 (*bai 4 huo 3 jiao 4* = worship~fire~religion = Manichaeism) came to China and became 明教 (*ming 2 jiao 4* = bright~religion).

Liberals endorse 開明 (*kai 1 ming 2* = open~bright = enlightened) thinking. 恩怨分明 (*en 1 yuan 4 fen 1 ming 2* = favor~offence~discern~clearly) means clear-cut distinction between favors/friends and offences/foes. All Chinese denounce British-French soldiers’ 1860 burning/looting of Beijing’s imperial garden 圓明園 (*yuan 2 ming 2 yuan 2* = round~bright~garden = Garden of Political/Moral Enlightenment/Perfection).

by Diana Yue