

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 fortune-telling



Putonghua pronunciation: *bu3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *buk1*

Meanings: forecast fortune

Ancient Chinese soothsayers scorched 甲骨 (*jiá3 gu3* = shell~ bone = tortoise-shells and ox-bones = oracle bones) to 占卜 (*zhān1 bù3* = observe-forecast = interpret scorched cracks on oracle bones, forecast person/country's fortune). Today's Chinese 占卦 (*zhān1 guā4* = get-interpret~divination-diagrams from the I Ching), 求籤 (*qiú2 qiān1* = get-interpret~divination-sticks) at temples, welcome 上籤 (*shàng4 qiān1* = top/good~ fortune-forecast), worry about 下籤 (*xià4 qiān1* = bottom/bad~ fortune-forecast).

Fortune-tellers also 卜夢 (*bù3 mèng4* = interpret~dreams), 看相 (*kàn4 xiàng4* = observe-interpret~facial-features), 看手相 (*kàn4 shǒu3 xiàng4* = observe-interpret~hand~features = read palms), read 塔羅牌 (*tǎ3 luó2 pái2* = "Tarot"-transliterated-cards).

前途未卜 (*qián2 tu2 wèi4 bù3* = ahead~path~not-yet~forecasted) means uncertain/unclear future, but Buddhists believe 積業 (*jī1 yè4* = accumulated/past-works/doings, i.e. karma) affects fortune.

by Diana Yue