

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: *zhao4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *siu6*

Meanings: portend, portent, sign, omen

兆 = 兆頭 (*zhao4 tou2* = portend-head = portent/omen). Pains are 徵兆 (*zheng1 zhao4* = symbol-sign) of illness. Animals' unrest 預兆 (*yu4 zhao4* = anticipate~portend) earthquake.

Soothsayers watch 天象 (*tian1 xiang4* = sky/heavenly~signs): 雲氣 (*yun2 qi4* = clouds~air = clouds' formation), 星象 (*xing1 xiang4* = stars'~signs/appearance), 流星雨 (*liu2 xing1 yu3* = flow~star~rain = meteor showers), 預言 (*yu4 yan2* = anticipate~say = predict/prophesy) 吉凶 (*ji1 xiong1* = auspicious/fortune~ominous/misfortune = success or failure) of military/political enterprises. 彗星 (*hui4 xing1* = broom~stars = comets) are 不祥之兆 (*bu4 xiang2 zhi1 zhao4* = no~luck~'s~omen = ominous signs).

Peasants believe 瑞雪兆豐年 (*ruì4 xuě3 zhāo4 fēng1 nián2* = auspicious~snow~portend~abundant~year = good snow means good harvest).

by Diana Yue