

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

辟

Putonghua pronunciation: *bi4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *pik1*

Meanings: dispel, drive away, subdue, exorcise evil spirits, counteract evil force

Etymologically, 辟 = 關 (*bi4* = open/clear up). Pioneers 開關 (*kai1 bi4* = open~clear) frontiers. Exorcist opens mouth, casts spells, hence 辟 = dispel/exorcise. Insecticides 辟蟲 (*bi4 chong2* = drive-away~bugs). Perfumes 辟臭 (*bi4 chou4* = dispel-stink). Lawyer's statement 闢謠 (*bi4 yao2* = dispels/clarifies-rumors). On 端午節 (*Duan1 Wu3 Jie2* = first-fifth~festival = fifth day of Fifth Lunar Month = Dragon Boat Festival Day), hot weather makes 五毒 (*wu3 du2* = five~poisonous-pests = snakes, centipedes, scorpions, lizards, toads) rampant. Mineral 雄黃 (*xiong2 huang2* = male~yellow = rabiagar) can 辟邪 (*bi4 xie2* = dispel-evil = exorcise/subdue their evil influence).

Advised by exorcist, 許仙 (*Xü3 Xian1*) made Madame White swallow rabiagar drink. She immediately 現形 (*xian4 xing2* = showed-her-true-form): a snake!

by Diana Yue