

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 assassins

暗

Putonghua pronunciation: *an4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *am3*

Meanings: dark, hidden, unclear, dull, dim, secretly

暗 (radical 日 *ri4*, sun/sunlight/light) means dark/dim/subdued: 陰暗 (*yin1 an4* = yin-principle/moon~dark = dark) sky, 暗紅 (*an4 hong2* = dull~red) lipstick. 暗暗 (*an4 an4* = dark~dark) = secretly: 暗示 (*an4 shi4* = secret-indication = hint), 暗笑 (*an4 xiao4* = hidden~smile/laugh = secretly despise/amused).

Oil-painting shows objects' 明暗 (*ming2 an4* = light~shadows = chiaroscuro). 明升暗降 (*ming2 sheng1 an4 jiang4* = openly~ promote~secretly~demote) means promoting someone to position with less real power. 暗算 (*an4 shuan4* = secret~calculate) = stabbing/slandering/hurting someone behind his back.

Defector claims he 棄暗投明 (*qi4 an4 tou2 ming2* = abandon~dark~join~light = is leaving bad/unrighteous forces to join good forces). Rivals 暗恨 (*an4 hen4* = secretly~hate) each other. Conspirators plot 暗殺 (*an4 sha1* = secret~killing/assassination).

by Diana Yue