

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 narcissism

Putonghua pronunciation: *zi 4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ji 6*

Meanings: self, independent

自己 (*zi4 ji3* = self~myself) = oneself. 自由 (*zi4 you2* = self~let-free) = freedom. Literature expresses individual's 自我 (*zi4 wo3* = self~I = ego). 自私 (*zi4 si1* = self~private) = selfish. 自大 (*zi4 da4* = self~big = conceited) people lack 自知之明 (*zi4 zhi1 zhi1 ming2* = self~know~'s~clarity = understanding of own calibre).

自 indicates reflexive action: 自殺 (*zi4 sha1* = self~kill = suicide), 自律 (*zi4 lu4* = self~discipline), 自治 (*zi4 zhi4* = self~governing = autonomous). 自慰 (*zi4 wei4* = self~comfort) = 自瀆 (*zi4 du2* = self~profane) = masturbate.

不知自愛 (*bu2 zhi1 zi4 ai4* = no~know~self~love) describes people throwing away their own lives frivolously. 自戀狂 (*zi4 lian3 kuang2* = self~loving~mania) = narcissism.