

Character Builder

您好學? 呀

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 Flaming Mountains

焰

Putonghua pronunciation: *yan4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yim6*

Meanings: flame, brightness, passion, burn, shine, violent power

焰 (radical 火 *huo3*, fire) means 火焰 (*huo3 yan4* = fiery-flames), 火舌 (*huo3 she2* = fire-tongue = tongues of fire). Nouveaux-riche has 氣焰 (*qi4 yan4* = air/gas-flame = arrogant airs).

Novel 《西遊記》 (*Xi You Ji4* = west-travel-record = Journey to the West) describes 唐僧 (*Tang2 seng1* = Tang-Dynasty-monk = Xūanzang/Tripitaka)'s journey to obtain Buddhist sutras in India, escorted by disciples Monkey (monkey-demon 孫悟空 *Sun1 Wu4 Kong1* = surname-Sun-understand-emptiness), Pigsy (pig-demon 朱八戒 *Zhu1 Ba1 Jie4* = surname-Zhu-eight-abstinences), Sandy (sandy-rapids-demon 沙僧 *Sha1 seng1* = surname-Sha-monk).

At 吐魯番 (*Tu4 Lu3 Fan1* = Turfan) in 新疆 (*Xin1 Jiang1* = new-territories/land = Xinjiang), 火焰山 (*Huo3 Yan4 Shan1* = fire-flame-mountain-range = the Flaming Mountains) blocked their way.

by Diana Yue