

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 the ugly duckling



Putonghua pronunciation: *ya1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *aap3*

Meanings: duck

鴨 (radical 鳥 *niao3*, bird) = 鴨子 (*ya1 zi0* = duck~diminutive) = duck: 公鴨 (*gong1 ya1* = male~duck/drake), 母鴨 (*mu3 ya1* = female~duck), 鴨蛋 (*ya1 dan4* = duck~egg), 鴨絨 (*ya1 rong3* = duck~down). 鴨雛 (*ya1 chu1* = duck~fledgling) = 小鴨 (*xiao3 ya1* = little~duck/duckling).

Gourmets love Cantonese 燒鴨 (*shao1 ya1* = roast~duck), Beijing's 烤鴨 (*kao3 ya1* = roast~duck = Peking duck), 鴨肉 (*ya1 rou4* = duck~meat) paté.

鴨 is 水禽 (*shui3 qin2* = water~fowl). 鴨綠江 (*Ya1 Lu4 Jiang1* = duck~green~river) = Yalu River, Chinese-North-Korean border. 春江水暖鴨先知 (*chun1 jiang1 shui3 nuan3 ya1 xian1 zhi1* = springtime~river~water~warm~ducks~first-know) describes ducks swimming in springtime river or insiders perceiving oncoming thaw/boom ahead of others.

by Diana Yue