

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 the ugly duckling



Putonghua pronunciation: *tian1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *tin1*

Meanings: sky, heaven, heavenly, serene, nature, day

Ideogram 天 indicates space above 人 (*ren2*, man), i.e. 天上 (*tian1 shang4* = sky~above). Chinese 天子 (*tian1 zi3* = heaven's-son = emperor with heavenly mandate) ruled 天下 (*tian1 xia4* = sky~below = the world), worshipped Heaven at 天壇 (*tian1 tan2* = heaven~altar = Beijing's Altar of Heaven).

天 has natural/heavenly/serene associations: 天真 (*tian1 zhen1* = natural-true = innocence/naivety), 天堂 (*tian1 tang2* = heaven-hall = Paradise), 天神 (*tian1 shen2* = heavenly~god/goddess), 天使 (*tian1 shi4* = heaven's~messenger = angel). 天蠍座 (*tian1 xie1 zuo4* = heavenly~scorpion~seat) = zodiac sign Scorpio.

Paris sees Helen of Troy, 驚為天人 (*jing1 wei2 tian1 ren2* = shock-as-heaven-person = is stunned by her serene beauty), exclaims: 天哪 (*tian1 na4* = heaven~ah = Oh/Dear Heavens!)