

# 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: e2

Cantonese pronunciation: ngoh4

Meanings: goose

鵝 (radical 鳥 *niao3*, bird) includes 家鵝 (*jia1 e3* = domesticated-goose), 雁鵝 (*yan4 e2*, wild-goose~goose = 雁 *yan4*, wild goose). 鵝蛋臉 (*e2 dan3 lian3* = goose~egg~face) = girl's oval face. 鵝毛雪 (*e2 mao2 xue3* = goose~feather~snow) = big/palm-sized snow-flakes.

天鵝 (*tian1 e2* = heavenly~geese = swans) have serene associations. 癩蝦蟆想吃天鵝肉 (*lai4 xia1 ma0 xiang3 chi1 tian1 e2 rou4* = warty-toad~wants-to-eat~swan's~meat) describes lowly person's unrealistic fantasies. 天鵝之歌 (*tian1 e2 zhi1 ge1* = swan~song) means dying/exiting person's final performance/contribution.

Plain-looking 小天鵝 (*xiao3 tian1 e2* = young~swan = cygnet) is protagonist of fairytale 醜小鴨變天鵝 (*chou3 xiao3 ya1 bian4 tian1 e2* = ugly~little~duck~transform~heavenly~goose = Ugly Duckling grows into Swan).

by Diana Yue