

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 babies

初

Putonghua pronunciation: *chu1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *choh1*

Meanings: first, original, early, beginning, new

初 (radical 衤 = 衣 *yi1*, clothes) means first/beginning/early: 起初 (*qi3 chu1* = start-begin = at first), 初步 (*chu1 bu4* = first-step = early) plans, 初期 (*chu1 qi1* = early~stage) cancer, 初中 (*chu1 zhong1* = early~middle = junior high-school).

In 初春 (*chu1 chun1* = early~spring) they 初次 (*chu1 ci4* = first-time) met. It was her 初戀 (*chu1 lian4* = first~love-affair). She gave him her 初夜 (*chu1 ye4* = first-night = virginity). 初雪 (*chu1 xue3* = first~snow) falls in 初冬 (*chu1 dong1* = early~winter).

初生嬰兒 (*chu1 sheng1 ying1 er2* = just-born~babies) are sweet. 人之初, 性本善 (*ren2 zhi1 chu1, xing4 ben3 shan4* = human-'s~beginning, nature-originally~good/kind) means “All people are born with good nature”.