

Character Builder

您好嗎? 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 horses



Putonghua pronunciation: *ma3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ma5*

Meaning: horse

Pictogram 馬 (showing mane and four dots as legs) is also radical for horse-related characters: 驢 (*lü2*, donkey), 駝 (*tuó2*, camel), 驛 (*yì4*, relay station). 馬術 (*mǎ3 shù4* = horse-method) = equestrian art/sports. 千里馬 (*qiān1 lǐ3 mǎ3* = thousand-miles-horse) = superb horse/talent. 馬戲 (*mǎ3 xì4* = horse-play/show) = circus.

Chief 出馬 (*chū1 mǎ3* = out-horse = wields authority): Reforms 上馬 (*shàng4 mǎ3* = up/mount-horse = are launched), non-performing officials/projects 下馬 (*xià4 mǎ3* = down/dismount-horse = are sacked/scrapped).

汗血寶馬 (*hàn4 xuè3 bǎo3 mǎ3* = sweat-blood-treasure-horse) = stallions from Turkmenistan, allegedly sweating blood. 人馬座 (*rén2 mǎ3 zuò4* = person-horse-seat) is zodiac sign Sagittarius. 天馬行空 (*tiān1 mǎ3 xíng2 kōng1* = heavenly-horse-walk-in-sky) describes boundless imagination or empty bluff.

by Diana Yue