

Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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 fire

Putonghua pronunciation: *huo3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *foh2*

Meaning: fire, angry, trendy

火 (character/radical) indicates fire/fiery/burning: 火焰 (*huo3 yan4* = fiery-flame), 易燃 (*yi4 ran2* = easily-burn/flammable), Cavemen 鑽木取火 (*zuan4 mu4 qu3 huo3* = drilled-into-wood-to-obtain/start-fire). Camper uses 火種 (*huo3 zhong3* = fire-seed = tinder), 打火機 (*da3 huo3 ji1* = hit-fire-machine = lighter) 生火 (*sheng1 huo3* = born/start-a-fire).

縱火 (*zong4 huo3* = loosen-fire = arson) creates 火災 (*huo3 zai1* = fire-calamity), 救火 (*jiu4 huo3* = save-fire) = fire-fighting, 火花 (*huo3 hua1* = fire-flowers) = fiery sparks, 星火燎原 (*xing1 huo3 liao2 yuan2* = star-fire-burn-plain) describes small uprising spreading into big revolution.

熱情如火 (*re4 qing2 ru2 huo3* = hot/seething-emotion-resemble-fire) describes passionate lover. However, 光火 (*guang1 huo3* = light/bright-fire) means flaring up in anger.

by Diana Yue