

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 Narcissus

仙

Putonghua pronunciation: *xian1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sin1*

Meanings: fairy, immortal

仙 (亻 = 人 *ren2*, person + 山 *shan1*, mountain) = 神仙 (*shen2 xian1* = god~fairy = transcendental being). Ancient Taoists 求仙 (*qiu2 xian1* = seek~fairy = practiced alchemy to attain fairyhood/immortality). Folklores describe 仙人 (*xian1 ren2* = immortal~person = fairies/immortals), 仙境 (*xian1 jing4* = fairy~places), 狐仙 (*hu2 xian1* = fox~fairies).

詩仙 (*shi1 xian1* = poetry~fairy) = poet with unworldly talent. 飄飄欲仙 (*piao1 piao1 yu4 xian1* = float~float~almost-become~fairy) = feel elated/transcended. Euphemism 仙遊 (*xian1 you2* = fairy~travel = gone/became fairy) means someone has died.

仙女 (*xian1 nü3* = fairy~female = nymph) 艾柯 (*ai4 ke1* = "Echo"-transliterated) loved Narcissus. But Narcissus drowned kissing his own reflection, became 水仙花 (*shui3 xian1 hua1* = water~fairy~flower = narcissus/daffodil).

by Diana Yue