

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 longevity



Putonghua pronunciation: *guī*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gwai1*

Meaning: tortoise, turtle

Pictogram 龜 shows 烏龜 (*wu1 guī* = black/all-tortoise) or 鱗 (*bie1*, soft-shelled turtle) with head, body, tail. Chinese fortune-tellers interpret cryptic inscriptions on 龜甲 (*guī jia3* = tortoise-armor/shells). Chinese medicinal concoctions use 金錢龜 (*jin1 qian2 guī* = gold-coin-turtle = small water turtles) 龜板 (*guī ban3* = tortoise-plank/under-belly-shells).

龜蛋 (*guī dan4* = tortoise/turtle's-egg) also means 王八蛋 (*wang2 ba1 dan4* = bastard). 縮頭烏龜 (*suo1 tou2 wu1 guī* = pulling-back-head-black-tortoise) means coward.

龜 (*guī*) and 歸 (*guī*, return) are synonyms, hence “海龜” (*hai3 guī* = sea-turtle) yields new term “海歸” (*hai3 guī* = from-sea-returned), nowadays' overseas Chinese returning to China for careers/resettlement.