

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 the five elements



Putonghua pronunciation: *shui3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sui2*

Meanings: water

Taoists say 陰陽 (*yin1 yang2* = Yin-Yang, male-female complementary forces) and 五行 (*wu3 xing2* = five-movement = five elements interacting in nature) underlie all physical/ meta-physical existence. 五行 (water, fire, metal, wood, earth) 相生 (*xiang1 sheng1* = mutually~generate), 相剋 (*xiang1 ke4* = mutually~overcome) each other, e.g. 水生木 (*shui3 sheng1 mu4* = water~nourishes~wood/trees), 水剋火 (*shui3 ke4 huo3* = water~conquers~fire).

水 is everywhere: 雨水 (*yu2 shui3* = rain~water), 井水 (*jing2 shui3* = well~water), 露水 (*lu4 shui3* = dew~water), 淚水 (*lei4 shui3* = tear~water/drops). Fortune-tellers say 水為財 (*shui3 wei2 cai2* = water~is/brings~money).

洪水猛獸 (*hong2 shui3 meng3 shou4* = flood~water~fierce~beasts) means calamitous/destructive forces. 行雲流水 (*xing2 yun2 liu2 shi3* = moving~clouds~flowing~water) describes flowing music.

by Diana Yue