

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: *hou3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *foh2*

Meanings: fire

火 produces 火焰 (*huo3 yan4* = flames), 火光 (*huo3 guang1* = fire's~light/brightness). 火生土 (*huo3 sheng1 tu3* = fire~generates~earth/ashes), 火剋金 (*huo3 ke4 jin1* = fire~overcomes/melts~metals) demonstrate 五行 (*wu3 xing2* = five~elements) principles.

Radical 火 indicates fire's heat/application: 燒 (*shao1*, burn), 炎 (*yan2*, hot/fever), 炸 (*zha4*, deep-fry), 炒 (*chao3*, stir-fry). 火鍋 (*huo3 guo1* = fire~pot/wok) = hot-pot. 火箭 (*huo3 jian4* = fire~arrow) = rocket.

怒火 (*nu4 huo3* = anger~fire) = anger. Tabloids 煽風點火 (*shan4 feng1 dian2 huo3* = fan~wind~light~fire = create/fan misunderstandings/animosity) until rivals 水火不相容 (*shui2 huo3 bu4 xiang1 rong2* = water~fire~won't~mutually~tolerate). Vicar warns adulterous couple: “慾火焚身!” (*yu4 huo3 fen2 shen1* = lust~fire~burn~body = “Your lust will destroy you!”)

by Diana Yue