

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 Dragon Boat Festival



Putonghua pronunciation: *she2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *se4*

Meanings: snake

蛇 (radical 虫 *chong2*, insect/bug) symbolizes evil/wickedness. Story 白蛇傳 (*bai2 she2 zhuan4* = white-snake-legend) goes: 白蛇 (*bai2 she2* = white~snake) and 青蛇 (*qing1 she2* = bluish-green~snake) transformed themselves into humans, 迷惑 (*mi2 huo4* = deceive~baffle = bewitched) young scholar 許仙 (*Xü Xian1*).

On fifth day of fifth lunar month, people drink 雄黃酒 (*xiong2 huang2 jiu3* = powdered-rabiagar~wine) to exorcize 五毒 (*wu3 du2* = five~poison = five venomous creatures: scorpions, snakes, lizards, centipedes, toads). 白娘娘 (*bai2 niang2 niang2* = white-lady~lady = Madame White Snake) was condemned as 蛇蠍美人 (*she2 xie1 mei3 ren2* = snake~scorpion-beauty~person = beautiful woman with wicked heart) and killed.

But story-readers were touched by 人蛇戀 (*ren2 she2 lian4* = human~snake~love-story).

by Diana Yue