

# 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 the five elements



Putonghua pronunciation: **mu4**

Cantonese pronunciation: **muk6**

Meanings: wood

木 = 木頭 (**mu4 tou2** = wood~head = wood). Radical 木 indicates nature/action/form of wood/trees: 樹 (**shu4**, tree), 林 (**lin2**, forest), 松 (**song1**, pine), 板 (**ban3**, plank), 柴 (**chai2**, firewood). 木生火 (**mu4 sheng1 huo3** = wood~generates/feeds~fire), 木剋土 (**mu4 ke4 tu3** = wood/roots~overcome/break~earth) demonstrate 五行 (**wu3 xing2** = five~elements) principles. Lumberjacks 伐木 (**fa2 mu4** = fell~wood/trees), carpenters 鋸木 (**ju4 mu4** = saw~wood). 枯木逢春 (**ku1 mu4 feng2 chun1** = withered~tree~meets~spring) = revival of happiness/fortune. 木然 (**mu4 ran2** = wood~like) = expressionless, 木訥 (**mu4 na4** = wood~stutter/speechless) = laconic. Teachers hope students 成材 (**cheng2 cai2** = mature~into~trees = become useful/independent people), but some 朽木不可雕 (**xiu3 mu4 bu4 ke3 diao1** = rotten~wood~no~can~carve = are un-teachable/hopeless).

by Diana Yue