

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 lovely sky

Putonghua pronunciation: *yün2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *wan4*

Meanings: cloud

Ideogram 雲 has radical 雨 (*yü3*, rain). Artists paint 白雲 (*bai2 yün2* = white-clouds), 雲山 (*yün2 shan1* = cloud-mountains = piled up clouds), 雲彩 (*yün2 cai3* = cloud-multi-colors = prettily-colored clouds), 雲霧 (*yün2 wu4* = clouds-mists/fogs).

Weather forecast reports 烏雲 (*wu1 yün2* = black/dark-clouds), 雨雲 (*yü3 yün2* = rain-clouds). Astronomers watch 雲層 (*yün2 cheng2* = cloud-tiers), 星雲 (*xing1 yün2* = stars-clouds = nebulas). However, 雲雨情 (*yün2 yü3 qing2* = clouds-rain-love) means sexual affair.

“行到水窮處 (*xing2 dao4 shui3 qiong2 chu4* = walk-reach-water-exhaust-place), 坐看雲起時 (*zuo4 kan4 yün2 qi3 shi2* = sit-watch-clouds-rise-time)” are famous lines describing poet’s solitary excursion into nature: “Walk up to the stream’s source, sit and watch the clouds rise”.

by Diana Yue