

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 fish

Putonghua pronunciation: *shui3*
Cantonese pronunciation: *sui2*
Meanings: water, liquid, fluid

水 = water/liquid: 海水 (*hai3 shui3* = sea~water), 雨水 (*yü3 shui3* = rain~water), 淚水 (*lei4 shui3* = tear~drops). Fish/crustaceans are 水族 (*shui3 zu2* = water~tribes = aquatic creatures). Compatible partners 如魚得水 (*ru2 yü2 de2 shui3* = resemble~fish-in/having~water). 魚水之歡 (*yü2 shui3 zhi1 huan1* = fish~water~'s~joy) means amorous/sexual pleasure.

水火不相容 (*shui3 huo3 bu4 xiang1 rong2* = water~fire~cannot~mutually~tolerate) describes clashing personalities. 河水不犯井水 (*he2 shui3 bu4 fan4 jing3 shui3* = river~water~won't~invade~well~water) describes different entities keeping interests apart without mutual interference.

細水長流 (*xi4 shui3 chang2 liu2* = small~water/stream~long/continual~flow) describes quiet, long-lasting feelings/relationship. 流水不腐 (*liu2 shui3 bu4 fu4* = flowing~water~doesn't~rot = Constantly-used skill/mind is always alive/energized) is ancient Chinese maxim.

by Diana Yue