

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 children

真

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhen* 1

Cantonese pronunciation: *jan* 1

Meanings: real, authentic, true, truth, pure, purity

真 = real/true. Art-collectors seek 真跡 (*zhen1 ji1* = real-print/track = artists' authentic works). Philosophers seek 真理 (*zhen1 li3* = true-principle = infallible truth). Soul-searchers seek 真我 (*zhen1 wo3* = true-me = real self).

純真 (*chun2 zhen1* = pure-true) people have pure/artless personality. 天真 (*tian1 zhen1* = heaven/nature-true) people are innocent/pure-minded/simplistic/credulous. Children are 天真無邪 (*tian1 zhen1 wu2 xie2* = heaven/nature-true-without-evil = innocent, free from wicked/evil thoughts). Children's 童真 (*tong2 zhen1* = child-true/pure = childish innocence) amuses adults. However, adults behaving childishly/foolishly are derisively called “老天真!” (*lao3 tian1 zhen1* = “old-innocent!”). 真命天子 (*zhen1 ming4 tian1 zi3* = true-destiny-heaven's-son = truly-chosen one) means truly-destined king/emperor or contest's final winner or girl's final choice of husband.

by Diana Yue