

Character Builder

您好學? 呀

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 first-home purchases

Putonghua pronunciation: *shou3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sau2*

Meaning: head, first, initial, principal, leading, beginning

首 means head: 首都 (*shou3 du1* = head-city = capital city), 元首 (*yuan2 shou3* = primary-head = head of state), 首相 (*shou3 xiang4* = prime-minister), 坐首席 (*zuo4 shou3 xi2* = sits-at-head-of-table), 首級 (*shou3 ji2* = head-class) means head. Women wear 首飾 (*shou3 shi1* = head-decorations = jewelry). 罪魁禍首 (*zui4 kui2 huo4 shou3* = sin/crime-first-harm-head = leading criminal) 自首 (*zi4 shou3* = self-emerge = surrenders himself), escapes getting 斬首 (*zan3 shou3* = chop-head = beheaded).

Hong Kong is 首屈一指 (*shou3 qu1 yi1 zhi3* = first-bend-one-finger = first/top) in house-price soar, 首次買房者 (*shou3 ci4 mai3 fang2 zhe3* = first-time-buy-house-person = first-time home-purchaser) pays exorbitant 首貸 (*shou3 dai4* = first-mortgage).

by Diana Yue