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 Journey to the West

徒

Putonghua pronunciation: tu2
Cantonese pronunciation: to4
Meanings: student, apprentice

Novel's protagonist 唐僧 (Tang2 seng1 = Tang-Dynasty-monk = Xuanzang/Triptiaka) crossed 沙漠 (sha1 mo4 = sandy-deserts) riding on a 白馬 (bai2 ma3 = white-horse), escorted by three 徒弟 (tu2 di4 = disciple-young-brother = disciples): Monkey (monkey-demon 孫悟空 Sun1 Wu4 Kong1 = surname-Sun-understand-emptiness), Pigsy (pig-demon 朱八戒 Zhu1 Ba1 Jie4 = surname-Zhu-eight-abstinences), Sandy (sandy-rapids-demon 沙僧 Sha1 seng1 = surname-Sha-monk).

The disciples had 法術 (fa3 shu4 = magic-methods = magical powers). Monkey had 七十二變 (qi1 shi2 er4 bian4 = seven-ten-two-change = seventy-two/innumerable ways of transfiguration).

The disciples were naughty/unruly, often 意馬心猿 (yi4 ma3 xin1 yuan2 = thought-horse-heart-monkey = swayed by temptations), but finally 得成正果 (de2 cheng2 zheng4 guo3 = achieve-become-correct/orthodox-fruit/result = achieved enlightenment).

by Diana Yue