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 lullabies

Putonghua pronunciation: guai1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai1
Meaning: perverse, well-behaved, intelligent, dexterous, sweet-tempered, obedient, darling

乖 (radical 千 qian1, thousand) has opposite meanings: 乖張 (guai1 zhang1 = perverse-rude/arrogant) rogue, but Grandma’s 乖孫 (guail sun1= sweet/obedient-grandchild), 乖巧 (guai1 qiao3 = sweet-tempered-intelligent) student/pet.

乖覺 (guai1 jue2 = intelligent/smart-alert/quick-minded) fox outsmands hunter. After crackdown, drug-traffickers 學乖 (xue2 guai1 = learn-smart = get smarter), find new buyers.

Mom sings to her 小乖乖 (xiao3 guai1 guai1 = little-darling): 小兔子乖乖, 把門兒開開 (xiao3 tu4 zi0 guai1 guai1, ba3 men2 er0 kai1 kai1 = little-rabbit-dearie, open-open-the-door), 不開不開我不開 (bu4 kai1 bu41 kai1 wo3 bu4 kai1 = no-open-no-open-I-no-open), 媽媽沒回來, 誰也不能開 (ma1 ma1 mei2 hui2 lai2, shei2 ye3 bu4 neng2 kai1 = Mommy-isn't-back, I-won't-open-to-anyone).

by Diana Yue