Character Builder

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 change of weather

Putonghua pronunciation: bian4
Cantonese pronunciation: bin3
Meaning: change, transform, alter, become, rebel

變 (radical又 you4, again) means 改變 (gai3 bian4 = alter-change), 變化 (bian4 hua4 = change-transformation). Pupa 蝴蝶 (tui4 bian4 = changes/metamorphoses-into-becomes) butterfly, Husband 變心 (bian4 xin1 = changes-heart, loves another). Magician/illusionist 變走 (bian4 zou3 = change-run/gone = vanishes) tiger.

變天 (bian4 tian1 = change-sky) means weather/regime change. Weather 變暖 (bian4 nuan3 = becomes-warm = warms up), 變涼 (bian4 liang2 = becomes-cool = cools down), 變好 (bian4 hao3 = becomes-good = improves), 變壞 (bian4 huai4 = becomes-bad = worsens). Army initiates 政變 (zheng4 bian4 = political-change/rebellion/coup).

Sage advises: 穀則變, 變則通 (qiong2 ze2 bian4, bian4 ze2 tong1 = end/exhaust-then-change, change-then-through = When road ahead is blocked, change strategy, and you will find way out).

by Diana Yue