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 the five elements

火 Putonghua pronunciation: hou3  Cantonese pronunciation: foh2
Meanings: fire

火 produces 火焰 (huo3 yan4 = flames), 火光 (huo3 guang1 = fire’s-light/brightness). 火生土 (huo3 sheng1 tu3 = fire-generates-earth/ashes), 火剋金 (huo3 ke4 jin1 = fire-overcomes/melts-metals) demonstrate 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-elements) principles.

Radical 火 indicates fire’s heat/application: 燃 (shao1, burn), 炎 (yan2, hot/fever), 炸 (zha4, deep-fry), 炒 (chao3, stir-fry). 火鍋 (huo3 guo1 = fire-pot/wok) = hot-pot. 火箭 (huo3 jian4 = fire-arrow) = rocket.

怒火 (nu4 huo3 = anger-fire) = anger. Tabloids 揚風點火 (shan4 feng1 dian2 huo3 = fan-wind-light-fire = create/fan misunderstandings/animosity) until rivals 水火不相容 (shui2 huo3 bu4 xiang1 rong2 = water-fire-won’t-mutually-tolerate). Vicar warns adulterous couple: “怒火焚身!” (yu4 huo3 fen2 shen1 = lust-fire-burn-body = “Your lust will destroy you!”)

by Diana Yue