

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 Solomon's wisdom

Putonghua pronunciation: *yīng1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yīng1*

Meanings: baby, infant

嬰 (two 貝 *bei4*, seashell/treasure + 女 *nü3*, woman/female) = 嬰兒 (*yīng1 er2* = baby-child): 男嬰 (*nan2 yīng1* = male-baby = baby boy), 女嬰 (*nü3 yīng1* = female-baby = baby girl), 棄嬰 (*qi4 yīng1* = abandoned-baby).

Woman 十月懷胎 (*shi2 yue4 huai2 tai1* = ten-moon/month-hide/carry-womb = goes through 10 lunar months of pregnancy), 瓜熟蒂落 (*gua1 shou2 di4 luo4* = melon-ripen-stalk-fall = melon ripens/drops = gives smooth birth). 呱呱墮地 (*gua1 guag1 duo4 di4* = “gua-gua”-sound-fall-to-ground) describes new-born baby crying.

Christmas cards depict 聖母 (*sheng4 mu3* = holy-mother = Mary) holding 聖嬰 (*sheng4 yīng1* = holy-baby = baby Jesus). 聖嬰效應 (*sheng4 yīng1 xiao4 yīng4* = holy-baby-effect) = El Nino (Spanish: “the Holy Baby-boy”) effect.

by Diana Yue