

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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

Putonghua pronunciation: *jin1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gam1*

Meanings: metal

Radical 金 indicates nature/use of 金屬 (*jin1 shu2* = gold-kind = metals): 銀 (*yin2*, silver), 鋼 (*gang1*, steel), 鑿 (*zao2*, hammer), 鑽 (*zhuan4*, screw). 金生水 (*jin1 sheng1 shui3* = metal-generate/ trap/ contain-water), 金剋木 (*jin1 ke4 mu4* = metal-overcomes/ splits-wood), demonstrate 五行 (*wu3 xing2* = five-elements) principles.

Taoists practice 煉金術 (*lian4 jin1 shu4* = transmuting-metals-into-gold-method = alchemy). Jewelers study 鑲金工藝 (*lou4 jin1 gong1 yi4* = carve-gold-work-art/craft = gold-carving/filigree workmanship). Investors watch 黃金價格 (*huang2 jin1 jia4 ge2* = yellow-gold's-price-status = gold prices). 金條 (*jin1 tiao2* = gold-strip) = gold bars/ingots.

黑金 (*hei1 jin1* = black-gold) means secretly circulated gangsters' money (not petroleum, the English meaning). 拜金主義 (*bai4 jin1 zhu3 yi4* = worship-gold-main-principle) = materialism/mammonism.

by Diana Yue