

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 animal stories



Putonghua pronunciation: *gui1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gwai1*

Meanings: tortoise

Character 龜 shows tortoise's head, body, tail. 烏龜 (*wu1 gui1* = black~tortoise) symbolizes 長壽 (*chang2 shou4* = long-life = longevity). However, 縮頭烏龜 (*shu1 tou2 wu1 gui1* = withdraw-head-tortoise) means coward. 龜頭 (*gui1 tou2* = tortoise-head) means tip of male penis.

Because 龜 (*gui1*) and 歸 (*gui1*, home-coming/return) are synonyms, “海龜派” (*hai3 gui1 pai4* = sea~turtle~group) means “海歸派” (*hai3 gui1 pai4* = sea~return~group), i.e. Chinese studying/working abroad returning to China to find career.

In Aesop's fable, hare is 懶惰 (*lan3 duo4* = lazy~procrastinate = lazy), 睡過頭 (*shui4 guo4 tou2* = sleep-pass-head = oversleeps). Tortoise 努力 (*nu3 li4* = strain~strength = tries hard), 不停跑 (*bu4 ting2 pao3* = non-stop-runs) and wins.