

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 job-hunting

浮

Putonghua pronunciation: *fu2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *fau5*

Meanings: float, floating, swell, swollen

浮 (radical 氵 = 水 *shui3*, water) = float: 浮水 (*fu2 shui3* = float-on-water), 浮雲 (*fu2 yun2* = floating~clouds). Memories 浮現 (*fu2 xian4* = float-appear/take shape). Europeans (non-English) pronounce “UFO” (acronym for “unidentified flying object”) as [ˈjufo] (like “you-foe”), hence Chinese transliteration “幽浮” (*you1 fu2*, literally “indistinct-floating”, a term with mysterious feel).

人心浮動 (*ren2 xin1 fu2 dong4* = people’t-hearts~float~move) describes disturbing times. Because 人浮於事 (*ren2 fu2 yu1 shi1* = people~float-on~things/jobs = too many people, not enough jobs), graduates 浮沉 (*fu2 chen2* = float/emerge~sink/submerge = sometimes do so-so, sometimes not).

Forget about 浮名 (*fu2 ming2* = floating-name = empty fame). 浮生若夢 (*fu2 sheng1 ruo4 meng4* = floating-life~resembles~dream = “Life is but a dream”).

by Diana Yue