

Character Builder 您好學？

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 beggars

缺

Putonghua pronunciation: *quē1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *kuet3*

Meanings: lack, lacking, missing, deficient

缺 (radical 缶 *fou3*, pot, suggesting chipped utensil) means 缺乏 (*quē1 fa2* = miss-lack = insufficiency). Deserts 缺水 (*quē1 shuǐ3* = lack-water), 缺魚 (*quē1 yú2* = have-no-fish). 缺少 (*quē1 shǎo3* = miss-lack) means short of. 缺電 (*quē1 diàn4* = shortage-of-electricity) causes blackout.

Gamblers 缺錢 (*quē1 qián2* = are-short-of-money/cash). Mahjong/bridge game cannot start if 三缺一 (*sān1 quē1 yī1* = three-lack-one = three players available, one short). 缺德 (*quē1 dé2* = lack-morality/virtue) describes immoral behavior/people or irresponsible sarcasms.

Poet laments 月圓月缺 (*yuē4 yuán2 yuē4 quē1* = moon-round-moon-incomplete = moon's wax and wane = time's passing and ups-and-downs in life/fortune). Beggars just want 衣食無缺 (*yī1 shí2 wú2 quē1* = clothes-food-no-lack = enough clothes, enough food).

by Diana Yue