

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 choirs

聲

Putonghua pronunciation: *sheng1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sing1*

Meanings: sound, voice

聲 (radical耳 *er3*, ear) means 聲音 (*sheng1 yin1* = voices~sounds/noises): 水聲 (*shui3 sheng1* = water's~sound), 鳥聲 (*niao3 sheng1* = bird~song), 迴聲 (*hui2 sheng1* = return/sound = echoes), 人聲 (*ren2 sheng1* = people's~sounds/voices): 哭聲 (*ku1 sheng1* = sobbing/wailing~sounds), 笑聲 (*xiao4 sheng1* = laughing/giggling~sounds), 書聲 (*shu1 sheng1* = book/reading/reciting~sounds), 歌聲 (*ge1 sheng1* = singing~sound).

風聲 (*feng1 sheng1* = wind's~sounds = suspicious signs/whisperings/stirrings) alert spies/speculators. Putonghua pronounces Chinese characters/*zi* in 四聲 (*si4 sheng1* = four~tones), i.e. four 聲調 (*sheng1 diao4* = sound~pitch).

In 聲樂 (*sheng1 yue4* = vocal~music), opera singers use 美聲唱法 (*mei3 sheng1 chang4 fa3* = beautiful~sound~singing~method = bel canto). 先聲奪人 (*xian1 sheng1 duo2 ren2* = early~sound~capture~people) describes singer/star/athlete's stunning debut.

by Diana Yue