

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 operas

詞

(radical 言 *yan2* = mouth)

Putonghua pronunciation: *ci2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chi4*

Meanings: word, term, lyrics

In Chinese, 字 (*zi4*, characters/words) form 詞 (*ci2*, words/terms). 字典 (*zi4 dian3* = characters/words~classic = dictionaries) contain 詞彙 (*ci2 hui4* = words/terms~assemble = vocabulary). Chinese 詞 (*ci2*, “ci poems” having fixed melody/rhyme schemes) can be read or sung.

Stage actor delivers 台詞 (*tai2 ci2* = stage-words = lines/dialogue). 填詞人 (*tian2 ci2 ren2* = fill-in-words~person = lyricist) writes 曲詞 (*qu3 ci2* = song~words = song lyrics) for composer’s melody.

歌劇 (*ge1 ju3* = opera)’s 歌詞 (*ge1 ci2* = song~words = libretti) tell stories of 悲歡離合 (*bei1 huan1 li2 he2* = sorrow-joy~separation~union = many sad/happy events). Cheerful words fit 快板 (*kuai4 ban3* = fast-clapper-beat = fast tempo). Sad/sombre words fit 慢板 (*man4 ban3* = slow~clapper-beat = slow tempo).

by Diana Yue