

Character Builder 您好嗎? 呀

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 blind groping

Putonghua pronunciation: *xiàng4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jeung6*

Meanings: appearance, shape, image, elephant

象 = 形象 (*xíng2 xiàng4* = shape~image/style). 印象 (*yìn4 xiàng4* = seal/imprint~image) = impression. 象棋 (*xiàng4 qí2* = elephant~chess = Chinese chess) has chess-piece 象 (*xiàng4* = opponent's 相 *xiàng4*, minister).

Animal 象 is fondly called 大笨象 (*dà4 bèn4 xiàng4* = big~clumsy/stupid~elephant). 象拔 (*xiàng4 bā2* = elephant~pull) = elephant's nose. Western idiom 白象 (*bái2 xiàng4* = white~elephant) means cumbersome/useless asset/burden. Chinese saying 瞎子摸象 (*xiā1 zǐ0 mō1 xiàng4* = blind-person~touch/feel~elephant = blind person/people touching/feeling elephant's body to guess animal's appearance) means blind/limited observation cannot give you the real/full picture.

Poachers want 象牙 (*xiàng4 yá2* = elephant's~teeth/tusks = ivory), hence 象以齒焚身 (*xiàng4 yǐ3 chǐ3 fēn2 shēn1* = elephant~because-of~tusks~burnt~body = possession of enviable assets/talents causes possessor's destruction).

by Diana Yue