

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 reunion gatherings

故

Putonghua pronunciation: *gu4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *goo3*

Meanings: old-time, past, ancient, original, former, late, die, dead

故 contains 古 (*gu3*, ancient), means old/former: 故事 (*gu4 shi4* = past~event = story), 故鄉 (*gu4 xiang1* = old~village = birth-place/hometown/homeland), 故友 (*gu4 you3* = dead~friend). 故宮 (*gu4 gong1* = old~palace) means Beijing's former imperial palace.

Emigrants re-visit 故國 (*gu4 guo2* = once~country = country they left), 故地重遊 (*gu4 di4 chong2 you2* = old~places~again~tour = re-visit old haunts), cherish reunion with 故人 (*gu4 ren* = past~persons = old-time friends/acquaintances).

一見如故 (*yi1 jian4 ru2 gu4* = one~see~resemble~old) describes new acquaintances getting along well immediately. However, 衣不如新, 人不如故 (*yi1 bu4 ru2 xin1, ren1 bu4 ru2 gu4* = clothes~incomparable~new, person~incomparable~old = Clothes are better when new, but new friends can't beat old friends.)

by Diana Yue