

Character Builder 您好學? 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 lonely people

寡

Putonghua pronunciation: *gua3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gwa2*

Meanings: lacking, single, few, scant, widowed, bland

寡 (radical 宀 *mian2*, roof) suggests lonely dweller/widow: 孤兒寡婦 (*gu1 er2 gua3 fu4* = orphaned-child-widowed-woman/wife = deceased's family), 新寡 (*xin1 gua3* = newly-widowed). 守寡 (*shou3 gua3* = maintain-widowhood) means 寡居 (*gua3 ju1* = widowed-reside = live in widowhood). 寡人 (*gua1 ren2* = lacking-person) is Chinese emperor's modest self-reference. 寡言 (*gua3 yan2* = lacking/few-words = laconic) person 寡趣 (*gua3 qu4* = lacks-fun), 寡歡 (*gua3 huan1* = lacks-mirth/joy). 味寡 (*wei4 gua3* = taste-lacking) describes bland-tasting cooking or un-stimulating conversation/writing. 寡頭政治 (*gua3 tou2 zheng4 zhi4* = single-head-political-rule) = oligarchy.

Social idealists wish 鰥寡孤獨, 皆有所養 (*guan1 gua3 gu2 du2, jie1 you3 suo3 yang3* = bachelors-widows-orphans-loners, all-have-their-feed = all family-less people have food/care).

by Diana Yue