

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 centenary celebrations

百

Putonghua pronunciation: *bai3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *baak3*

Meanings: hundred, many

百 = hundred. Chinese count by tens: 個, 十, 百, 千, 萬 (*ge4, shi2, bai3, qian1, wan4* = one-ten-hundred-thousand-ten-thousand). 百萬 (*bai3 wan4* = 100~10,000 = 1 million). 億 (*yi1* = hundred-million) = 100,000,000. China has 十三億 (*shi2 san1 yi1* = ten~three~100,000,000 = 1,300,000,000 = 1.3 billion) people.

百 indicates many/complete. Government feeds country's 百姓 (*bai3 xing4* = hundred-surnames = entire population). 百貨公司 (*bai3 huo4 gong1 si1* = hundred/many-goods-public-bureau) = department store. 百科全書 (*bai3 ke1 chuan2 shu1* = hundred-subjects-complete-book) = encyclopedia.

University celebrates建校百年 (*jian4 xiao4 bai3 nian2* = build-school-hundred-years = school's centenary). Novelist describes 人生百態 (*ren2 sehgn4 bai3 tai4* = people-lives~ hundred-postures = human behavior in many walks of life).

by Diana Yue