

Character Builder

您好學嗎？

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 kindergartens

Putonghua pronunciation: *miao2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *miu4*

Meaning: seedling, plant's young shoot, animal's young

苗 (**/草 *cao3*, grass + 田 *tian2*, farmed field) = 幼苗 (*you4 miao2* = young-young-shoot = plant/animal's young): paddy-farmer's 秧苗 (*yang1 miao2* = young-shoot), fish-breeder's 魚苗 (*yü2 miao2* = fish-young = young fish), 苗圃 (*miao2 pu3* = young-shoots-garden/nursery) grows 樹苗 (*shu4 miao2* = trees'-young-shoots), 苗裔 (*miao2 yi4* = young-shoot-descendent) = clan's offsprings.

火苗 (*huo3 miao2* = fire-young-shoot) = flames. 疫苗 (*yi4 miao2* = epidemic-young-shoot) = vaccine. 苗條 (*miao2 tiao2* = young-shoot's-stem) describes girl's slim/willowy figure. 有苗頭 (*you3 miao2 tou2* = has/shows-seedling-head) means showing early promising sign.

Kindergartens' task is 育苗 (*yü4 miao2* = breed-young-shoots = educating/cultivating) children, not 拔苗助長 (*ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3* = pull-seedlings-help-grow = boosting children's premature development).

by Diana Yue