

# Character Builder 您好學？

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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 old people

老

Putonghua pronunciation: *lao3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *lo5*

Meanings: old, elderly, time-worn, long-lasting, dated, senior

老 (showing disheveled oldster with walking-stick) means 老舊 (*lao3 jiu4* = old-used/dated/passé), 老去 (*lao3 qu4* = aging-aged/faded). 老掉牙 (*lao3 diao4 ya2* = old-drop-teeth) describes stale/unoriginal story/idea.

老友 (*lao3 you3* = old-friend/pal) is endearing term. 老師 (*lao3 shi1* = old-teacher), 老板 (*lao3 ban3* = old-board) just mean teacher, boss. 老毛 (*lao3 Mao2* = old-Mao) = Mao Zedong. 倚老賣老 (*yi2 lao3 mai4 lao3* = depend-old-sell-old) describes oldies flaunting age/seniority.

老人 (*lao3 ren2* = old-people)'s bodies/brains 老化 (*lao3 hua4* = age-deteriorate). 老頭 (*lao3 tou2* = old-head = old man) grieves as 老伴 (*lao3 ban4* = old/long-time-companion/spouse) gets 老人失智症 (*lao3 ren2 shi1 zhi4 zheng4* = old-person-lose-memory/sanity-illness = senile dementia = Alzheimer's disease).

by Diana Yue