

Character Builder 您好嗎? 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 longevity

Putonghua pronunciation: *qian1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *chin1*

Meaning: thousand, kilo

千 (radical 十 *shi2*, ten) = thousand: 千元鈔 (*qian1 yūan2 chao1* = thousand-dollar-banknote), 千米 (*qian1 mi3* = thousand-meters = 公里 *gong1 li2* = universal-mile = kilometer), 千克 (*qian1 ke1* = thousand-grams = 公斤 *gong1 jin1* = universal-catty = kilogram), 千年蟲 (*qian1 jian2 chong2* = thousand-year/millennium-bug).

Wedding-night 一刻千金 (*yi1 ke1 qian1 jin1* = one-moment-thousand-gold-pieces) is most treasurable. 千金 (*qian1 jin1* = thousand-gold-pieces) also means respectable person/friend's daughter. 千里馬 (*qian1 li3 ma3* = thousand-mile-horse) means fast/sturdy stallion or talented person destined to go far.

Leader bears 千斤重擔 (*qian1 jin1 zhong4 dan4* = thousand-catty-heavy-burden = great responsibilities). Critics assess his 千秋功罪 (*qian1 qiu1 gong1 zui4* = thousand-autumns-achievements-crimes = achievements/faults in historical perspective).

by Diana Yue