

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 winter grandchildren



Putonghua pronunciation: *ye2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ye4*

Meaning: grandfather, male senior, lord, male deity

爺 (radical 父 *fu4*, father) = grandfather/senior/god. Grand-kids play with 爺爺 (*ye2 ye0* = grandpa) and grandpa's friend 王爺爺 (*Wang2 Ye2 Ye0* = Wang-grandpa = old Mr. Wang). Photo shows 爺孫三代 (*ye2 sun1 san1 dai4* = grandpa-grandson-three-generations = three generations of the family).

老爺 (*lao3 ye2* = old-grandpa) = master/bureaucrat-in-charge. 王爺府 (*wang2 ye2 fu3* = king/prince-grandpa-residence) = prince's palace. Hunting is 爺們 (*ye2 men2* = grandpa-plural = lords/men)'s sport.

Worshippers believe 老天爺 (*lao3 tian1 ye2* = old-heaven-grandpa = Heaven), 佛爺 (*fo2 ye2* = old-Buddha-grandpa = merciful Buddha) hear their prayers. 閻王爺 (*yan2 wang2 ye2* = Hell-king-grandpa) = King/ruler of Hell. Beggar implores: “大爺 (*da4 ye2* = big-grandpa = sir), spare a dime!”

by Diana Yue