

Character Builder 您好學? 好

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

年

Putonghua pronunciation: *nian2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *nin4*

Meaning: year, age, harvest

年 (radical 禾 *he2*, grain-shoot) = year: 今年 (*jin1 nian2* = this-year), 明年 (*ming2 nian2* = next-year), 年月 (*nian2 yue4* = years-months = time), farmer's 豐年 (*feng1 nian2* = abundant-year/harvest), school's 學年 (*xue2 nian2* = academic-year), astronomer's 光年 (*guang1 nian2* = light-years).

花樣年華 (*hua1 yang4 nian2 hua2* = flower-like-years-radiance) = girl's blooming years. 財政年度 (*cai2 zheng4 nian2 du4* = money-policy-year-pass) = fiscal year. Son pays inheritance tax after Dad 百年之後 (*bai3 nian2 zhi1 hou4* = hundred-years-'s-afterwards = dies).

Poet laments 似水流年 (*si1 shui3 liu2 nian2* = resemble-water-flowing-years = the passing years): 少年 (*shao4 nian2* = young-years/age = adolescence), 中年 (*zhong1 nian2* = middle-age), 老年 (*lao3 nian2* = old-age).

by Diana Yue