

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 grasslands

(radical 馬 *ma3*, horse)

Putonghua pronunciation: *qi 2, ji 4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ke 4*

Meanings: ride horse, horse

Pictogram 馬 shows mane and four dots/legs. Verb 騎 means ride: 騎馬 (*qi2 ma3* = ride~horse), 騎車 (*qi2 che1* = ride~car = ride bicycle), 騎兵 (*qi2 bing1* = ride~soldier = cavalrymen). Noun 騎 (*ji4*) means horse-and-rider: 千里走單騎 (*qian1 li3 zou3 dan1 ji4* = thousand~miles~runs~lone~rider) = single warrior/agent going far out on a challenging mission.

騎術 (*qi2 shu4* = riding~method) = horseback-riding/equestrianism. King Arthur's knights are 騎士 (*qi2 shi4* = ride~soldiers), chivalry is 騎士精神 (*qi2 shi4 jing1 shen2* = knight's~essence~spirit).

騎虎難下 (*qi2 hu3 nan2 xia4* = riding~tiger~difficult-to~descend) means unable to disentangle oneself from an awkward involvement/commitment. 騎牆派 (*qi2 qiang2 pai4* = ride/sit-on~wall~faction) are fickle opportunists sitting aloof and bending towards whoever offers advantages.

by Diana Yue