

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:

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 age

Putonghua pronunciation: *ling2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ling4*

Meaning: age, year, fixed number of years, duration

齡 (radical 齒 *chi3*, tooth) means 年齡 (*nian2 ling2* = years-age): 樹齡 (*shu4 ling2* = tree's-age), 學齡 (*xue2 ling2* = school-age), 芳齡 (*fang1 ling2* = flower/woman's-age). Chinese count person's 虛齡 (*xu1 ling2* = empty-age = real age plus two years) at birthday/death.

Person quitting job loses 工齡 (*gong1 ling2* = work-age = recognized years of service in that job). 妙齡少女 (*miao4 ling2 shao4 nu3* = nice-age/teenage/twenty-ish-young-girl) gets many dates. 大齡青年 (*da4 ling2 qing1 nian2* = big-age-green-years = "over-aged youths") are 超齡 (*chao1 ling2* = past-the-age) for marriage.

高齡人士 (*gao1 ling2 ren2 shi4* = high-age-people) = oldies/seniors. 高齡產婦 (*gao1 ling2 chan3 fu4* = high-age-give-birth-woman) means relatively old pregnant woman giving birth.

by Diana Yue