

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 short lives

Putonghua pronunciation: *ming4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ming6*

Meaning: life, fate, bestow, command

命 (口 *kou3*, mouth + 令 *ling4*, command) means bestowed legacy: 天命 (*tian1 ming4* = heaven's-command = fate), 生命 (*sheng1 ming4* = life-command = life), 使命 (*shi4 ming4* = envoy-command = mission), 命運 (*ming4 yun4* = life's-workings) = fate/fortune/destiny.

Assassin shouts: 取你狗命 (*qu3 ni3 gou3 ming4* = take-your-dog's-life!) Target 拼命 (*ping1 ming4* = risking/fighting-for-life = desperately) 逃命 (*tao2 ming4* = runs-for-his-life), shouts 救命 (*jiu4 ming4* = save-my-life!)

Accident claimed 一條人命 (*yi1 tiao2 ren2 ming4* = one-unit-human-life = one life). Victim 死於非命 (*si3 yu1 fei1 ming4* = die-of-not-fate = died unnatural death). 好命 (*hao3 ming4* = good-life = lucky/blessed) guy wins lottery, cries: 要命 (*yao4 ming4* = want/after-my-life = Wow/Terrible/Mamma mia!)

by Diana Yue