

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 celebrations

笑

Putonghua pronunciation: *xiao4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *siu3*
Meaning: smile, laugh, laughter

笑 (radical 竹 *zhu2*, bamboo) means 微笑 (*wei1 xiao4* = faint/slight-smile), 笑出來 (*xiao4 chu1 lai2* = smile-burst-out-come = chuckle/laugh), 笑聲 (*xiao4 sheng1* = laughing-sound = laughter). Guest presents gift, says “請笑納 (*qing3 xiao4 na4* = please-smilingly-accept)!”

笑話 (*xiao4 hua4* = laugh-talk) means funny joke/gag or laughing stock or outrage. Stupid politician 鬧笑話 (*nao4 xiao4 hua4* = stirs-up-scandal/outrage). Supporters 苦笑 (*ku3 xiao4* = bitterly/helplessly/embarassed-smile). Enemies 暗笑 (*an4 xiao4* = darkly-smile = smile/jeer secretly).

Winner 哈哈大笑 (*ha1 ha1 da4 xiao4* = onomatopoeia-“ha-ha”-big-laugh = laughs loudly). Stoical loser 一笑置之 (*yi1 xiao4 zhi4 zhi1* = one-smile-leave-it = dismisses it with a smile). Centenarian's funeral is 笑喪 (*xiao4 sang1* = all-smiles/happy-funeral, nothing to cry about).

by Diana Yue