

# Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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

薄

Putonghua pronunciation: *bao2, bo2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *bok6*

Meaning: thin, slim, flimsy, unkind, ill-treat

薄 (radical 艹 = 草 *cao3*, grass) means thin/slim/flimsy. 薄片 (*bao2 pian4* = thin-piece/slice), 薄餅 (*bo2 bing3* = thin-cake/wrap/bliny), 薄膜 (*bao2 mo2* = thin-film), 薄禮 (*bo2 li3* = modest-present), 薄命 (*bo2 ming4* = thin-life/fate) describes really unfortunate people.

Small business 財力薄弱 (*cai2 li4 bao2 ruo4* = wealth-power-thin-weak = has small budget), earns 薄利 (*bo2 li4* = meagre-profits), 刻薄 (*ke1 bao2* = strict-unkind = mean) employer 薄待 (*bao2 dai4* = cold-treat = poorly treats) employees.

Some people 薄有才華 (*bao2 you3 cai2 hua2* = thin-possess-talent-radiance = are quite talented) but earn 微薄 (*wei1 bo2* = small-meager) income. Heaven 厚此薄彼 (*hou4 ci3 bo2 bi3* = thick-this-thin-that = blesses one, neglects another = is unfair)!

by Diana Yue