Character Builder

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\*\*\*\* tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2\*\*\*\* tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3\*\*\*\* tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4\*\*\*\* 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 making selections

優
Putonghua pronunciation: you1
Cantonese pronunciation: yau1
Meaning: abundant, excellent, best, fine, advantaged

優 (radical 亻 = ren2, person/human) means good/outstanding: 優點 (you1 dian3 = good-points), 優勢 (you1 shi4 = good/strong-position = advantage), 優待 (you1 dai4 = preferential-treatment). 優秀 (you1 xiu4 = fine-outstanding) singer has 優美 (you1 mei3 = fine-beautiful) voice, 優雅 (you1 ya3 = fine-elegant) airs.

優質 (you1 zhi4 = good-quality) education produces 優等生 (you1 deng3 sheng1 = top-grade-students). 優裕 (you1 yu4 = fine/abundant-affluent = affluent) living requires 優厚 (you1 hou4 = good-thick = good) income.

優良常可劣 (you1 liang2 chang2 ke3 lie4 = excellent-good-common-passable-poor) is five-tier grading. In competition, 優勝劣敗 (you1 sheng4 lie4 bai4 = strong-candidates-win-poor-candidates-lose). Proud winner develops 優越感 (you1 yue4 gan3 = good-surpass-feeling = sense of superiority).

by Diana Yue