

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 operas

歌

Putonghua pronunciation: *ge1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *goh1*

Meanings: song, sing

Noun 歌 = 歌曲 (*ge1 qu3* = song/singing): 藝歌 (*yi4 ge1* = art-songs), 民歌 (*min2 ge1* = folk-songs), 歌廳 (*ge1 ting1* = song-hall = cabaret).

Verb 歌 = 唱歌 (*chang4 ge1* = sing~songs). Chinese opera 戲曲 (*xi4 qu3* = drama~singing) combines 唱 (*chang4*, singing), 做 (*zuo4*, do = acting), 舞 (*wu3*, dancing), 拍和 (*pai1 he2* = clapper-beat~harmony = orchestral accompaniment). Female impersonator 梅蘭芳 (*Mei2 Lan2 Fang1*, 1894-1961) overwhelmed 京戲 (*jing1 xi4* = capital~drama = Beijing opera), 崑曲 (*kun1 qu3* = Kunshan~opera) fans.

Poet laments: “對酒當歌!” (*dui4 jiu3 dang1 ge1* = face~wine/liquor~should~sing = “Drink, enjoy, sing!”), “人生幾何?” (*ren2 sheng1 ji3 he2* = human~life~how~much = “How long can life last?”)

by Diana Yue