

# 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 ancient fables



Putonghua pronunciation: *yú2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yue1*

Meanings: a kind of reed instrument

竽 (radical 竹 *zhu2*, bamboo) = ancient Chinese 吹奏樂器 (*chui1 zou4 yue4 qi4* = blow-perform-musical-instrument = wind instrument).

Fable: King of 齊 (State of *Qi2*) loved listening to 吹竽 (*chui1 yú2* = blowing-*yú2*), hired 300 *yú2*-players to 合奏 (*he2 zou4* = combine-perform = play together), including 南郭先生 (*nan2 guo2 xian1 sheng1* = south-city-gate-mister = a guy from southern district), a fake. When King died, the new King ordered 獨奏 (*du2 zou4* = solo-performances). The guy fled because he was 濫竽充數 (*lan4 yú2 chong1 shu4* = surplus-*yú2*-fill-number = unskilled/incompetent, just making up the total).

Newcomer addresses peers modestly: "I'm just 濫竽充數 = I'm not so good. 請包涵 = *qing3 bao1 han2* = please-understand/tolerate!"

by Diana Yue