

Character Builder

您好學? 好

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 horses

騎

Putonghua pronunciation: *qi2*
Cantonese pronunciation: *ke4, kei4*
Meaning: ride, horse-and-rider

騎 (radical 馬 *ma3*, horse) means ride: 騎馬 (*qi2 ma3* = rides-horse), 騎車 (*qi2 che1* = ride-car = rides bicycle), 騎兵 (*qi2 bing1* = horseback-soldier). Noun 騎 means horse-and-rider. 騎術 (*qi2 shu4* = riding-method) = equestrian art/sports.

In mythology, Jesus 騎驢 (*qi2 lü2* = rides-donkey), Bodhisattva Manjusri 騎獅 (*qi2 shi1* = rides-lion), Bodhisattva Samantabhadra 騎象 (*qi2 xiang4* = rides-elephant). However, 騎虎難下 (*qi2 hu3 nan2 xia4* = ride-tiger-difficult-to-dismount) means unable to quit difficult/dangerous involvement.

Medieval 騎士 (*qi2 shi4* = ride-soldiers = knights) uphold 騎士精神 (*qi2 shi4 jing1 shen2* = knight's-essence-spirit = chivalry). Terrorists 騎劫 (*qi2 jie2* = ride-rob = hi-jack) airplane. Opportunists 騎牆 (*qi2 qiang2* = sit-astride-wall), look both ways, won't promise, won't commit.

by Diana Yue