

# 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 presidential elections



Putonghua pronunciation: *xiang4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jeung6*

Meanings: elephant

Pictogram 象 = 大象 (*da4 xiang4* = big-elephant), fondly called 大笨象 (*da4 ben4 xiang4* = big-clumsy/stupid-elephant). 長毛象 (*chang2 mao2 xiang4* = long-haired-elephant) = mammoth. 象拔 (*xiang4 ba2* = elephant-pull) = elephant's nose.

象牙 (*xiang4 ya2* = elephant-teeth/tusks) = ivory. Dreamer lives in 象牙塔 (*xiang4 ya2 ta3* = ivory-pagoda = ivory tower).

Chinese idiom 象以齒焚身 (*xiang4 yi3 chi3 fen2 shen1* = elephant-because-of-tusks-burnt-body) means possessing valuable assets/talents may cause possessor's doom.

象 is mascot of 共和黨 (*Gong4 He2 Dang3* = communal-harmony-party = the Republican Party) which lost presidential election. Voters 瞎子摸象 (*xia1 zi0 mo1 xiang4* = blind-person-touch/feel-elephant, i.e. try to figure out what an elephant (the big picture) looks like but cannot.

by Diana Yue