Chinese measure words 量词

NUMBER	MEASURE WORD	THING
三	本	书
sān	běn	shū
three	for books	book

A number can't touch a noun. English says a cup of tea or a pair of shoes for a few things. Chinese does it for every noun: 三本书, three books, never 三书. The word in the middle is the measure word.

Number + measure word + thing

Any number works the same way. 几 jǐ, how many, goes in the same spot.

一张票
yì zhāng piào
a ticket

三个人
sān ge rén
three people

五杯茶
wǔ bēi chá
five cups of tea

几本书?
jǐ běn shū?
how many books?

这 this, 那 that, 哪 which

They take a measure word too. A number goes after them: 这两本书.

这个人
zhège rén
this person

那本书
nà běn shū
that book

哪个?
nǎge?
which one?

这两本书
zhè liǎng běn shū
these two books

Two is 两, not 二

Count with 二, but in front of a measure word, two is 两.

两本书
liǎng běn shū
two books, never 二本书

两个人
liǎng ge rén
two people

十二个人
shí'èr ge rén
twelve: 二 inside a bigger number

Leave the thing off

When everyone can see what you mean, the measure word stands alone.

我要两个。
Wǒ yào liǎng ge.
I'll have two.

我要那个。
Wǒ yào nàge.
I'll have that one.

个: the safe default

个 works for people and most things

Forget the right word and 个 is the one people will understand.

一个苹果
yí ge píngguǒ
an apple

一个问题
yí ge wèntí
a question

But with some nouns it sounds wrong

Books, clothes and things you pour have their own measure word.

~~一个书~~
一本书
yì běn shū
a book

~~一个衣服~~
一件衣服
yí jiàn yīfu
a top

~~一个水~~
一杯水
yì bēi shuǐ
a glass of water

Verbs have measure words too: 次 and 遍

They count how many times, and go after the verb. 遍 means all the way through, start to end.

我去过两次。
Wǒ qù guo liǎng cì.
I've been there twice.

我看了两遍。
Wǒ kàn le liǎng biàn.
I've watched it twice, all the way through.

Tones on this sheet: 一 changes its tone in front of a measure word: 一个 yí ge, 一本 yì běn. Dictionaries write yī every time, and so do our other Chinese sheets, but here the pinyin shows what you hear. Page 4 has the rule.

22 to know 常用量词

个 gè

people and most things

人 rén person 苹果 píngguǒ apple

问题 wèntí question

The fallback. Usually said light: ge.

本 běn

books

书 shū book 杂志 zázhì magazine

词典 cídiǎn dictionary

Anything bound, with pages.

张 zhāng

flat things

纸 zhǐ paper 票 piào ticket 床 chuáng bed

张 means to open out: things that lie flat.

只 zhī

animals, one of a pair

猫 māo cat 鸟 niǎo bird 手 shǒu hand

Not the 只 zhǐ that means only.

条 tiáo

long, thin things

鱼 yú fish 路 lù road 裤子 kùzi trousers

Long and bendy, like a road or a fish.

件 jiàn

tops, and matters

衣服 yīfu clothes 外套 wàitào coat

事 shì matter

Tops, not trousers. 一件事: one thing to deal with.

双 shuāng

pairs

鞋 xié shoes 筷子 kuàizi chopsticks

袜子 wàzi socks

Two that go together. One shoe is 一只鞋.

杯 bēi

cups and glasses

水 shuǐ water 茶 chá tea 咖啡 kāfēi coffee

Hot or cold, if it's in a cup or a glass.

瓶 píng

bottles

啤酒 píjiǔ beer 可乐 kělè cola 牛奶 niúnǎi milk

瓶 on its own is a bottle.

碗 wǎn

bowls

饭 fàn rice 面 miàn noodles 汤 tāng soup

碗 on its own is a bowl.

块 kuài

pieces

蛋糕 dàngāo cake 手表 shǒubiǎo watch

肥皂 féizào soap

Also yuan, in speech: 三块钱.

辆 liàng

vehicles

车 chē car 自行车 zìxíngchē bike

公交车 gōngjiāochē bus

It has 车, vehicle, on its left.

位 wèi

people, politely

老师 lǎoshī teacher 医生 yīshēng doctor

先生 xiānsheng gentleman

Waiters ask 几位? How many of you?

口 kǒu

people in a family

人 rén family members

口 is a mouth: mouths to feed at home.

家 jiā

shops and companies

店 diàn shop 公司 gōngsī company

医院 yīyuàn hospital

The same 家 as home and family.

把 bǎ

things with a handle

椅子 yǐzi chair 伞 sǎn umbrella 钥匙 yàoshi key

把 means to grip: handles, and chairs too.

支 zhī

pens

笔 bǐ pen 铅笔 qiānbǐ pencil

口红 kǒuhóng lipstick

Thin and stiff. Sounds just like 只.

台 tái

machines

电脑 diànnǎo computer 电视 diànshì TV

洗衣机 xǐyījī washing machine

台 on its own is a stand or a stage.

部 bù

films and phones

电影 diànyǐng film 电视剧 diànshìjù TV drama

手机 shǒujī mobile phone

Phones also take 个: 一个手机.

首 shǒu

songs and poems

歌 gē song 诗 shī poem

One song, start to finish.

次 cì

times

一次 yí cì once 两次 liǎng cì twice

三次 sān cì three times

How often something happens.

遍 biàn

times through

看一遍 kàn yí biàn watch it all once

听两遍 tīng liǎng biàn listen through twice

All the way through, start to end.

In real life 句子

3 · jùzi · the measure word in pink

Food and drink

一杯咖啡
yì bēi kāfēi
a coffee

两瓶啤酒
liǎng píng píjiǔ
two bottles of beer

一碗面
yì wǎn miàn
a bowl of noodles

三个包子
sān ge bāozi
three steamed buns

Shopping

三件衣服
sān jiàn yīfu
three tops

一双鞋
yì shuāng xié
a pair of shoes

一条裤子
yì tiáo kùzi
a pair of trousers

这块手表
zhè kuài shǒubiǎo
this watch

Going out

两张票
liǎng zhāng piào
two tickets

一部电影
yí bù diànyǐng
a film

一首歌
yì shǒu gē
a song

这家店
zhè jiā diàn
this shop

People and pets

那位老师
nà wèi lǎoshī
that teacher

两个朋友
liǎng ge péngyou
two friends

一只猫
yì zhī māo
a cat

两条鱼
liǎng tiáo yú
two fish

At home

一辆车
yí liàng chē
a car

一台电脑
yì tái diànnǎo
a computer

四把椅子
sì bǎ yǐzi
four chairs

一张床
yì zhāng chuáng
a bed

In a sentence

我要一杯咖啡。
Wǒ yào yì bēi kāfēi.
I'd like a coffee.

这首歌很好听。
Zhè shǒu gē hěn hǎotīng.
This song is lovely.

这家店很有名。
Zhè jiā diàn hěn yǒumíng.
This shop is well known.

我妈妈有一辆车。
Wǒ māma yǒu yí liàng chē.
My mum has a car.

我买了两张票。
Wǒ mǎi le liǎng zhāng piào.
I bought two tickets.

那部电影很好看。
Nà bù diànyǐng hěn hǎokàn.
That film is really good.

那位老师是谁?
Nà wèi lǎoshī shì shéi?
Who's that teacher?

我家有四口人。
Wǒ jiā yǒu sì kǒu rén.
There are four of us in my family.

One noun, two measure words

The measure word can tell you how much: a glass or a bottle.

一杯啤酒
yì bēi píjiǔ
a glass of beer

一瓶啤酒
yì píng píjiǔ
a bottle of beer

Listen for the middle word.
In fast speech the number and the measure word run together: yí ge, liǎng zhāng. Catch the measure word and you often know what's coming before you hear the noun.

一 changes its tone 变调

One rule: 一 is yī on its own. In front of a measure word its tone depends on the next one: before a 4th tone it becomes yí, before a 1st, 2nd or 3rd tone it becomes yì.

1st tone next → yì

- 一张 yì zhāng
- 一杯 yì bēi
- 一只 yì zhī
- 一支 yì zhī
- 一双 yì shuāng
- 一家 yì jiā

2nd tone next → yì

- 一条 yì tiáo
- 一瓶 yì píng
- 一台 yì tái

3rd tone next → yì

- 一本 yì běn
- 一碗 yì wǎn
- 一把 yì bǎ
- 一首 yì shǒu
- 一口 yì kǒu

4th tone next → yí

- 一个 yí ge
- 一次 yí cì
- 一件 yí jiàn
- 一部 yí bù
- 一位 yí wèi
- 一辆 yí liàng
- 一块 yí kuài
- 一遍 yí biàn

个 is light, but still counts as 4th

Dictionaries give 个 as gè. In speech it's usually light, ge, but 一 still goes to yí in front of it, because the 4th tone is there underneath: 一个 yí ge.

When 一 stays yī

Alone, at the end of a bigger number, and when it means first.

一	十一个	第一次
yī	**shíyī ge**	**dì yī cì**
one, counting	eleven: 一 ends the number	the first time: order

Only 一 changes. 两, 三, 几 and 这 keep their tones.

一本	两本	三本	几本	这本
yì běn	liǎng běn	sān běn	jǐ běn	zhè běn

不 follows the same rule: bú before a 4th tone

不 doesn't go in front of measure words, but you'll hear the same change all the time.

不是	不要	不对
bú shì	**bú yào**	**bú duì**
isn't	don't want	not right

And bù before the rest

Before a 1st, 2nd or 3rd tone it stays as it is.

不吃	不来	不好
bù chī	**bù lái**	**bù hǎo**
won't eat	not coming	not good

One more you'll hear: two 3rd tones in a row, and the first one rises. 两本 liǎng běn sounds like liáng běn, and 几碗 jǐ wǎn like jí wǎn. Pinyin doesn't write this one, so it stays liǎng běn on paper.

From shows 口语

Set phrases: 一下, 一点儿 and 一会儿 are built like measure words but work as one word each. Learn them whole.

等一下!
Děng yíxià!
Wait a second!
一下: a quick go at something

你看一下。
Nǐ kàn yíxià.
Have a look.
after a verb, 一下 makes it short and soft

便宜一点儿吧。
Piányi yìdiǎnr ba.
Make it a bit cheaper?
一点儿: a little. In the south: 一点

慢一点儿!
Màn yìdiǎnr!
Slow down a bit!
after a describing word: a bit more so

一会儿见。
Yíhuìr jiàn.
See you in a bit.
一会儿: a short while

你要几个?
Nǐ yào jǐ ge?
How many do you want?
几 + measure word: how many

每个人都知道。
Měi ge rén dōu zhīdào.
Everyone knows.
每 + measure word: every, often with 都

这次就算了。
Zhè cì jiù suàn le.
I'll let it go this time.
这次: this time

下次吧。
Xià cì ba.
Maybe next time.
下次: next time

上次的事，对不起。
Shàng cì de shì, duìbuqǐ.
Sorry about last time.
上次: last time

再说一遍。
Zài shuō yí biàn.
Say that again.
遍: the whole thing, once more

再来一次!
Zài lái yí cì!
One more time!
次: once more

我一个人去。
Wǒ yí ge rén qù.
I'll go on my own.
一个人: alone, by yourself

您是哪位?
Nín shì nǎ wèi?
Who's calling, please?
哪位: who, politely, often on the phone

这件事跟你没关系。
Zhè jiàn shì gēn nǐ méi guānxi.
This has nothing to do with you.
这件事: this matter

吃一口吧。
Chī yì kǒu ba.
Have a bite.
口: a mouthful

Two to listen for: 一个人 can mean one person or on your own, alone. And 这次, 下次 and 上次 need no 个: 次 is already the measure word.

Practice 练习

How: cover the answers on the right with a strip of paper. Read each line out loud with the measure word you think fits, then check. The tone on — is a clue: yí means a 4th tone comes next.

1	请给我一_____水。 **Qǐng gěi wǒ yì _____ shuǐ.** · A glass of water, please.	杯 bēi
2	他买了两_____票。 **Tā mǎi le liǎng _____ piào.** · He bought two tickets.	张 zhāng
3	我家有五_____人。 **Wǒ jiā yǒu wǔ _____ rén.** · There are five of us in my family.	口 kǒu
4	这_____衣服很好看。 **Zhè _____ yīfu hěn hǎokàn.** · This top looks great.	件 jiàn
5	我想买一_____鞋。 **Wǒ xiǎng mǎi yì _____ xié.** · I want to buy a pair of shoes.	双 shuāng
6	那_____电视剧你看过吗? **Nà _____ diànshìjù nǐ kàn guo ma?** · Have you seen that drama?	部 bù
7	我借了三_____书。 **Wǒ jiè le sān _____ shū.** · I borrowed three books.	本 běn
8	她养了两_____猫。 **Tā yǎng le liǎng _____ māo.** · She has two cats.	只 zhī
9	这_____歌叫什么? **Zhè _____ gē jiào shénme?** · What's this song called?	首 shǒu
10	楼下有一_____车。 **Lóuxià yǒu yí _____ chē.** · There's a car downstairs.	辆 liàng
11	你好，几_____? **Nǐ hǎo, jǐ _____?** · Hello, how many of you?	位 wèi
12	借我一_____笔，好吗? **Jiè wǒ yì _____ bǐ, hǎo ma?** · Can I borrow a pen?	支 zhī
13	这本书我看了两_____。 **Zhè běn shū wǒ kàn le liǎng _____.** · I've read this book twice, cover to cover.	遍 biàn
14	这_____裤子太长了。 **Zhè _____ kùzi tài cháng le.** · These trousers are too long.	条 tiáo

Meet a measure word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means. Then come back to page 2 and see what else it counts.