

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:

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 age

幼

Putonghua pronunciation: *you4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yau3*

Meaning: young, younger, junior, children, slim

幼 (radical 幺 *yao3*, smallest/last) = young: 幼兒 (*you4 er2* = young-child = baby/toddler), 幼苗 (*you4 miao2* = young-shoot), 幼蟲 (*you4 chong2* = young-insect = larva). 幼 also means slim: 幼麵 (*you4 mian4* = thin/fine-noodles), 幼細 (*you4 xi4* = slim-small = fine) work/embroidery.

幼稚 (*you4 zhi4* = young-small) describes person's childish/foolish idea/action, but 幼稚園 (*you4 zhi4 yuan2* = young-small-garden) means kindergarten. Cityfolk 扶老攜幼 (*fu2 lao3 xi2 you4* = support-old-bring-young = taking entire households).

Confucius advocated 長幼有序 (*zhang3 you4 you3 xu4* = elder-younger-have-order = hierarchical) society. Sage advises: 幼吾幼以及人之幼 (*you4 wu2 you4 yi3 ji2 ren2 zhi1 you4* = care-for-our-young-and-extend-to-other-people's-young): Protect/love our own children and all children.

by Diana Yue