

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 felines



Putonghua pronunciation: *zhao3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jaau2*

Meanings: claw, talon, paw, claw-like object

爪 (picturing downward-facing hand) means 鳥爪 (*niao3 zhao3* = bird's~feet/claws), 獸爪 (*shou4 zhao3* = animals~paws/claws): 虎爪 (*hu3 zhao3* = tiger's~paw/talons), duck's 蹼爪 (*pu3 zhao3* = webbed-feet), 鷹爪 (*ying1 zhao3* = eagle's~claws), 利爪 (*li4 zhao3* = sharp~claws/talons). 魔爪 (*mo2 zhao3* = devil~claws) = crime-boss's grip/control. 張牙舞爪 (*zhang1 ya2 wu3 zhao3* = open-teeth~wave~claws) are snarling/menacing gestures.

貓爪 (*mao1 zhao3* = cat's~claws) leave 爪痕 (*zhao3 hen2* = claw/scratching~marks) on furniture. 雪泥鴻爪 (*xue3 ni2 hong2 zhao3* = snow~mud~wild-geese~claws = birds' footprints on snow) means fragmentary traces/memories of by-gone travels.

爪 + 扌 (= 手 *shou3*, hand) = verb 抓 (*zhua1*, clutch/grab/scratch/control). Crime-boss sends 爪牙 (*zhao3 ya2* = claws~teeth = lackeys/abettors) to 抓人 (*zhua1 ren2* = catch/hunt-down~people).

by Diana Yue