

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:

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 ancient fables

茅

Putonghua pronunciation: *mao2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *maau4*

Meanings: spear

矛 (pictogram resembling man carrying long weapon) and 盾 (pictogram resembling board protecting 目 *mu4*, eyes) are weapons. Warrior thrusts 長矛 (*chang2 mao2* = long-spear); opponent holds 盾牌 (*dun4 pai2* = shield-board = shield) against 矛頭 (*mao2 tou2* = spear-head). Figuratively, 矛頭 (*mao2 tou2* = spear-head) means attacks concentration, 後盾 (*hou4 dun4* = back-shield) means support/backing.

Fable: Vendor brags his 矛 (*mao2*, spear) and 盾 (*dun4*, shield) are both strongest. Query: Which will prove stronger if 以子之矛, 攻子之盾 (*yi3 zi3 zhi1 mao2, gong1 zi3 zhi1 dun4* = with-your-spear, attack-your-shield)? Hence modern term 矛盾 (*mao2 dun4* = spear-shield = paradoxical/mutually conflicting, contradiction/problem).

內部矛盾 (*nei4 bu4 mao2 dun4* = inside-part-contradiction) means group's internal problem/dispute/split.

by Diana Yue