

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 the underclass

Putonghua pronunciation: *nu2*
Cantonese pronunciation: *no4*
Meanings: slave, enslavement

奴 (女 *nü3*, woman + 又 = 手 *shou3*, hand/snatched) means 奴隸 (*nu2 li4* = owned-slave-laborer): old Tibet/Russia's 農奴 (*nong2 nu2* = farm~slaves/serfs), European/American 黑奴 (*hei1 nu2* = black/African~slaves). Ancient Chinese upper-class used 崑崙奴 (*kun1 lun2 nu2* = "Kunlun"-transliterated~slaves = black/Negrito slaves from Southeast Asia) as 家奴 (*jia1 nu2* = household/ domestic~slaves).

Overlords 奴役 (*nu2 yi4* = slave-labor = enslave) underdogs. WWII Japanese soldiers made Chinese/Korean women 性奴 (*xing4 nu2* = sex~slaves). Chinese kow-towing to foreigners show 奴性 (*nu2 xing4* = slavish/self-debasing~nature). Communists denounce 洋奴買辦 (*yang2 nu2 mai3 ban4* = across-ocean/foreigner's~slave~buy~handle/purchase = foreigners' lackeys and compradors).

Today, 房奴 (*fang2 nu2* = house~slave), 車奴 (*che1 nu2* = car~ slave) mean low-income worker slaving/toiling away to buy house/car.

by Diana Yue