

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

勞

Putonghua pronunciation: *lao2*
Cantonese pronunciation: *lo4*
Meanings: labor, toil

勞 (two 火 *huo3*, fire + 冫 house + 力 *li4*, strength) = 勞動 (*lao2 dong4* = work~move = labor), 勤勞 (*qin2 lao2* = diligent~hard-working). Brain-users 好逸惡勞 (*hao4 yi4 wu4 lao2* = like~leisure/freedom~dislike~toil), fear 勞改營 (*lao2 gai3 ying2* = labor~reform~camp = labor camp).

In 勞資談判 (*lao2 zi1 tan2 pan4* = workers~capitalists~talk~adjudication = employer-employees negotiations), 勞工 (*lao2 gong1* = laborers~workers) emphasize their 功勞 (*gong1 lao2* = achievement~labor = contributions), insist 多勞多得 (*duo1 lao2 duo1 de2* = more~work~more~gain/pay).

勞累 (*lao2 lei4* = work~fatigue) causes 筋骨勞損 (*jin1 gu3 lao2 sun3* = tendons~bones~toil~hurt = body-frame weakened/hurt), even 過勞死 (*guo4 lao2 si3* = over~work~die = Japanese term *karoshi* = overworked person's sudden death).

by Diana Yue