

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: *yi3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ngai5*

Meanings: ant

蟻 (radical 虫 *chong2*, insect/worm) = 螞蟻 (*ma3 yi3* = ant): 蟻后 (*yi3 hou4* = queen~ant), 雄蟻 (*xiong2 yi3* = male~ants = drones), 工蟻 (*gong1 yi3* = worker~ants), 蟻丘 (*yi3 qiu1* = ant~hill), 白蟻 (*bai2 yi3* = white~ants/termites).

蟻民 (*yi3 min2* = ant~people) means the masses, pitilessly squeezed/debased/crushed. But 螞蟻搬泰山 (*ma3 yi3 ban1 tai4 shan1* = ants~move~Tai~Mountain) describes humble sectors courageously performing stunning projects.

Today in big Chinese cities 蟻族 (*yi3 zu2* = ants~tribe) means low-income/unemployed college graduates living in suburban slums like 蟻群 (*yi3 qun2* = ant~group = ant colonies). Indeed, 螻蟻尚且偷生 (*lou2 yi3 shang4 che3 tou1 sheng1* = mole-crickets~ants~still~also~stealthily~live = even the lowliest creatures try hard to stay alive)!

by Diana Yue