

Character Builder 您好學？

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 old people

衰

Putonghua pronunciation: *shuail*

Cantonese pronunciation: *suil*

Meanings: decline, wane, deteriorate, dwindle, weaken, worsen, bad

衰 (radical 衣 *yi*, coat) means decline/wane: 衰弱 (*shuail ruo4* = deteriorating-weak), 衰老 (*shuail lao3* = weaken-age), 衰草 (*shuail cao3* = withered-grass), 衰翁 (*shuail weng1* = feeble/fragile-old-man). However, in Cantonese 衰人 (Cantonese *suil yan4*) means bad/naughty/exasperating person.

Glamorous woman fears 年老色衰 (*nian2 lao3 se1 shuail* = age-old-color-decline = aging, losing good looks), 陰盛陽衰 (*yin1 sheng4 yang2 shuail* = yin/female-principle-robust-yang/male-principle-weak) describes women outnumbering men.

盛極而衰 (*sheng4 ji2 er2 shuail* = prosper-ultimate-then-decline) = peak then fall. Historian marks civilizations' 盛衰 (*sheng4 shuail* = waxing and waning). In 經濟衰退 (*jing1 ji4 shuail tui4* = economy-decline-retreat = economic recession), cities 衰落 (*shuail luo4* = deteriorate-fall = decline), businesses 衰亡 (*shuail wang2* = decline-die/perish).

by Diana Yue