

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 Boxer Uprising

Putonghua pronunciation: *ruo4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yeuk6*

Meanings: weak, frail

弱 = weak/frail: 體弱 (*ti3 ruo4* = body~weak), 弱隊 (*ruo4 dui4* = weak~team), 弱點 (*ruo4 dian3* = weak~point), 弱智 (*ruo4 zhi4* = weak~intellect = mentally disabled). Low-income groups are 弱勢社群 (*guo4 shi4 she4 qun2* = weak~force~social-groups = underdogs).

Hamlet said, “弱者, 你的名字是女人!” (*ruo4 zhe3, ni3 de0 ming2 zi4 shi4 nü3 ren2* = weak~er, you~'s~name~word~is~woman~person = “Frailty, thy name is woman!”)

Pre-Revolution China 積弱 (*ji1 ruo4* = accumulate~weak = had been weak for a long time). 弱國無外交 (*ruo4 guo2 wu2 wai4 jiao1* = weak~state~has~no~foreign~liaison = A weak state has no say in diplomatic affairs), could only 示弱 (*shi4 ruo4* = show~weak = adopt gesture of humiliation).