

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 the fiscal cliff

挽

Putonghua pronunciation: *wan3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *waan5*

Meanings: hold, clutch, fetch, bring

挽 (radical 扌 = 手 *shou3*, hand) = clutch-hold action. Fireman 挽起 (*wan3 qi3* = takes up) bucket, 挽水 (*wan3 shui3* = take-up-water = carries/transport water) to quench fire. Archer 挽弓 (*wan3 gong1* = takes-bow), shoots deer. Lovers 挽手 (*shou3 wan3 shou3* = take-hand = hold each other's hand).

When bubble bursts, government tries to 挽救 (*wan3 jiu4* = pull-back-save = save/redeem) situation. Best economists get 挽留 (*wan3 liu2* = pull-hold-remain = invited/begged to stay on) to 力挽狂瀾 (*li4 wan3 kuang2 lan2* = strong-pull-mad-tide = fight on-coming big crash), 挽回 (*wan3 hui2* = pull-back = redeem) losses.

Praying for dead souls to return, mourners sing 挽歌 (*wan3 ge1* = beg-return-song) i.e. 輓歌 (*wan3 ge1* = mourning-elegy/dirge).

by Diana Yue