

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 diplomatic relations

助

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhu4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *joh6*

Meanings: help, aid, assist

助 (radical 力 *li4*, strength) = 幫助 (*bang1 zhu4* = gang/assist-help = help). 助手 (*zhu4 shou3* = help~hand) = 助理 (*zhu4 li3* = help~manage) = assistant. Team enlists veteran to 助陣 (*zhu4 zhen4* = help~military-formation = strengthen own side).

自助 (*zi4 zhu4* = self-help) = self-service, 自助餐 (*zi4 zhu4 can1* = self-help~meal) = buffet. Idiom 拔苗助長 (*ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3* = pull~young-shoot-help~grow) means prematurely helping budding protégée, thus ruining him/her.

Bankrupt state feels 無助 (*wu2 zhu4* = without-help = helpless), asks for 經濟援助 (*jing1 ji4 yuan2 zhu4* = manage-irrigate~list/assisting~helping = economic aid). Sage disagrees: “天助自助者 (*tian1 zhu4 zi4 zhu4 zhe3* = sky/heaven-help-self-help~person = Heaven help those who help themselves!”