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 age

幼
Putonghua pronunciation: you4
Cantonese pronunciation: yau3
Meaning: young, younger, junior, children, slim

幼 (radical 亻 yao3, smallest/last) = young: 幼兒 (you4 er2 = young-child = baby/toddler), 幼苗 (you4 miao2 = young-shoot), 幼蟲 (you4 chong2 = young-insect = larva). 幼 also means slim: 幼麺 (you4 mian4 = thin/fine-noodles), 幼細 (you4 xi4 = slim-small = fine) work/embroidery.

幼稚 (you4 zhi4 = young-small) describes person's childish/foolish idea/action, but 幼稚園 (you4 zhi4 yuan2 = young-small-garden) means kindergarten. Cityfolk 扶老攜幼 (fu2 lao3 xi2 you4 = support-old-bring-young = taking entire households).


by Diana Yue