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 Third World

弱

Putonghua pronunciation: ruo 4
Cantonese pronunciation: yeuk 6
Meanings: weak

弱 = weak: 弱點 (ruo dian 43 = weak-points = weaknesses), 弱者 (ruo zhe 43 = weak-persons/parties = weaklings), 弱隊 (ruo dui 44 = weak-team). Invalids 體質弱 (ti zhi ruo 344 = body-essence-weak = are physically weak). D-students 成績弱 (cheng ji ruo 214 = achieve-record-weak = have poor grades).

Internationalists sympathize with 弱小民族 (ruo xiao min zu 4322 = weak-small-people-race = weak races), want to 龍強扶弱 (chu qiang fu ruo 2224 = rake-strong-support-weak = eradicate bullies, help victims).

Ambassadors of 積弱 (ji ruo 14 = accumulate-weak = perennially weak) countries sigh: “弱國無外交!” (ruo guo wu wai jiao 42241 = weak-state-no-foreign-friendship = “For weak states, doing diplomatic work is useless!”)

by Diana Yue