Character Builder

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 old people

Putonghua pronunciation: zhou4
Cantonese pronunciation: jau3
Meanings: crimple, crumple, crease, wrinkle, wrinkled

皺 (radical 皮 pi2, skin) means 打皺 (da3 zhou4 = beat/become-creased). Brain’s surface has 皺痕 (zhou4 zhe2 = creases-folds). Linens easily 起皺 (qi3 zhou4 = up-crinkle = crumple/crease). 皺眉 (zhou4 mei2 = wrinkle-eyebrows = knitted brows) is worried expression.

Actress 不認老 (bu4 ren4 lao3 = no-admit-old = refuses to admit/show age), applies 除皺霜 (chu2 zhou4 shuang1 = remove-wrinkles-frost/cream) to 去皺 (qu4 zhou4 = go/remove wrinkles), eliminate 魚尾紋 (yu2 wei3 wen2 = fish-tail-lines = crows’ feet) around eyes.

Dorian Gray 不顯老 (bu4 xian3 lao3 = no-show-old = shows no sign of aging), but suddenly his picture 變老 (bian4 lao3 = change-old = turns old), 皺紋滿臉 (zhou4 wen2 man3 lian3 = has wrinkles-lines-all-over-face).

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