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

倒 (radical 人 = person) = 倒下 (dao3 xia4 = fall-down), 倒转 (dao3 zhuan4 = reverse-turn-around). Hit pedestrian 倒地 (dao3 di4 = falls-to-ground). Failed company 倒闭 (dao3 bi4 = collapses-closes).

Dictator 倒行逆施 (dao4 xing2 ni4 shi1 = reverse-act-opposite-administer = offends/violates popular will/preferences) but remains 不倒翁 (bu4 dao3 weng1 = no-fall-old-man = wobbly doll), can’t be 推倒 (tui1 dao3 = pushed-over), 打倒 (da3 dao3 = hit/beaten-down = toppled from power).

Oldie 倒霉 (dao3 mei2 = fall/pour-mildew/mould = is unlucky), 跌倒 (die1 dao3 = slips-and-falls), 病倒 (bing4 dao3 = ill-fall = falls ill), memory 倒退 (dao4 tui4 = reverse-retreat = deteriorates), begins 倒数 (dao4 shu3 = reverse-count = count down) of remaining years.

by Diana Yue