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 feeling good

Putonghua pronunciation: wei4
Cantonese pronunciation: wai3
Meanings: comfort, consolation, heart’s ease, solace

慰 has radical 心 (xin1, heart). 慰問 (wei4 wen4 = comfort-ask) = give condolences/greetings. Sympathizers 安慰 (an1 wei4 = console-comfort) sufferer. Widow seeks 慰藉 (wei4 ji2 = comfort-padding = comforting/warmth/petting). Music 撫慰 (fu3 wei4 = stroke-comfort = soothes) tired soul.

Loser bluffs to 聊以自慰 (liao2 yi3 zi4 wei4 = little-to-self-comfort = get some better-than-nothing self-consolation).

However, 自慰 (zi4 wei4 = self-comfort) means masturbation.


Boss throws party to 慰勞 (wei4 lao2 = comfort-labor = thank) team’s hard work. 老懷大慰 (lao3 huai2 da4 wei4 = old-bosom/heart-big-comfort) describes senior pleased by junior/protégé’s performance.

by Diana Yue