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 Qing Dynasty

末

Putonghua pronunciation: mo4
Cantonese pronunciation: moot6
Meanings: tip, end, ending, last, final, inessential, unimportant, powder

末 (resembling branch/needle’s tip) means unimportant/last/final: 粉末 (fen3 mo4 = powder-fine-powder), 窮途末路 (qiong2 tu2 mo4 lu4 = exhausted-path-end-of-road = without resources/future), 末日 (mo4 ri4 = last-day = Doomsday/Judgment-Day).

Emperors 康熙 (Kang1 Xi1), 雍正 (Yong1 Zheng4), 乾隆 (Qian2 Long2) ruled Qing Dynasty’s golden age. Later politicians 本末倒置 (ben3 mo4 dao3 zhi4 = main-end-reversed-placed = put first things last and last things first). 清末 (Qing1 mo4 = Qing’s-last-years) saw national strength’s 強弩之末 (qiang2 nu3 zhi1 mo4 = strong-bow~’s-end = final decline).

末代王孫 (mo4 dai4 wang2 sun1 = last-generation-of-nobility) 溥儀 (Pu3 Yi2, China’s last emperor) abdicated, headed Japan’s puppet-state 滿洲國 (Man2 Zhou1 Guo2 = Manchu-state = Japanese “Manchukuo”) in northeastern China.

by Diana Yue