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 Boxer Uprising

弱
Putonghua pronunciation: ruo4
Cantonese pronunciation: yeuk6
Meanings: weak, frail

弱 = weak/frail: 體弱 (ti3 ruo4 = body-weak), 弱隊 (ruo4 dui4 = weak-team), 弱點 (ruo4 dian3 = weak-point), 弱智 (ruo4 zhi4 = weak-intellect = mentally disabled). Low-income groups are 弱勢社群 (guo4 shi4 she4 qun2 = weak-force-social-groups = underdogs).

Hamlet said, “弱者, 你的名字是女人!” (ruo4 zhe3, ni3 de0 ming2 zi4 shi4 nü3 ren2 = weak-er, you~s-name~word-is~woman~person = “Frailty, thy name is woman!”)

Pre-Revolution China 積弱 (ji1 ruo4 = accumulate-weak = had been weak for a long time). 弱國無外交 (ruo4 guo2 wu2 wai4 jiao1 = weak-state-has-no-foreign-liaison = A weak state has no say in diplomatic affairs), could only 示弱 (shi4 ruo4 = show-weak = adopt gesture of humiliation).

by Diana Yue