

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 migrant workers

離

Putonghua pronunciation: *li2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *lei4*

Meanings: leave, depart, split up, set apart

離別 (*li2 bie2* = leave-separate) = depart. Discontented youths 離家出走 (*li2 jia1 chu1 zou3* = leave-home/family-out-runaway = abandon home), 離開 (*li2 kai1* = leave-open/gap = quit) job/town. Migrant workers 離鄉別井 (*li2 xiang4 bie2 jing3* = leave-home-village-depart~village-well) = go away/abroad), feel 人離鄉賤 (*ren2 li2 xiang1 jian4* = person~leave~home-village~downgraded = home-sick/down-trodden).

Couples who 貌合神離 (*mao4 he2 shen2 li2* = external-appearance~joined/compatible~spirit~separated) eventually 離婚 (*li2 hun1* = separate~marriage = divorce). Iago 離間 (*li2 jian4* = separate~block-off = sew ill feelings between) Othello and Desdemona. Basque Country pushes 分離主義 (*fen1 li2 zhu3 yi4* = separate-leave~main~meaning = separatism).

Novelists portray 悲歡離合 (*bei1 huan1 li2 he2* = woes~joys~separation~meeting/union = all kinds of sad/happy happenings).

by Diana Yue