

# 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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 felines

Putonghua pronunciation: *mao1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *maau1*

Meanings: cat

貓 (radical 豸 *zhi4*, long-spined mammal/insect) = cat/kitten. Shops/restaurants keep家貓 (*jia1 mao1* = domestic~cats) because 貓捉老鼠 (*mao1 zhu1 lao3 shu3* = cat~chase/catch~old~mouse = cats catch mice).

貓兒叫春 (*mao1 er0 jiao4 chun1* = kitty~calling~springtime = cat in heat purring/mewing “喵喵” (*miao1 miao1* sound). 閹貓 (*yan1 mao1* = spaying/neutering~cat) targets 公貓 (*gong1 mao1* = male/tom~cats). 母貓 (*mu3 mao1* = female/tabby~cats) breed 小貓 (*xiao3 mao1* = little~cats/kittens).

Gem 貓眼石 (*mao1 yan3 shi2* = cat's~eye~stone) = opal. 小野貓 (*xiao3 ye3 mao1* = little~wild~cat) was movie-star Brigitte Bardot's Chinese nickname. 夜貓子 (*ye4 mao1 zi0* = nocturnal~cat) means貓頭鷹 (*mao1 tou2 ying1* = cat~head~hawk = owl) or person who enjoys late-night activities/revelry.