

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 attires

Putonghua pronunciation: *mao4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *mo6*

Meanings: hat, cap, headgear

帽 (= 帽子 = *mao4 zi0* = hat-diminutive) protects 頭顱 (*tou2 lu2* = head~skull = head). Qing Dynasty men wore 瓜皮帽 (*gua1 pi2 mao4* = melon~skin~hat = small hat shaped like half watermelon).

Gents wear 禮帽 (*li3 mao4* = ritual~hat = top hats), 小圓禮帽 (*xiao3 yuan2 li3 mao4* = small-round~ritual-hat = bowler hats). Soldiers wear 貝雷帽 (*bei4 lei2 mao4* = “beret”-transliterated-hats). 鴨舌帽 (*ya3 she2 mao4* = duck~tongue/bill~hat) = peaked caps. 帽舌 (*mao4 she2* = hat~tongue) = visors. 四方帽 (*si4 fang1 mao4* = four~corner~hat = square academic hat) symbolizes academic qualification.

Political jargon 扣帽子 (*kou4 mao4 zi0* = slap-on~hat) means putting condemnatory tag on someone. 脫帽 (*tuō1 mao4* = take-off~hat) means rehabilitation.

by Diana Yue