

# 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 capital cities

Putonghua pronunciation: *gong1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gung1*

Meanings: palace, temple, castrate

宮 = palace/temple: London's 白金漢宮 (*Bai2 Jin1 Han4 Gong1* = “Buckingham”-transliterated~Palace), Beijing's 故宮 (*gu4 gong1* = past~palace = imperial palace), Washington's 白宮 (*Bai2 Gong1* = white~palace = White House). Ruler receives courtiers in 宮廷 (*gong1 ting2* = palace~court), 宮殿 (*gong1 dian4* = palace~halls/rooms).

Beijing's 雍和宮 (*Yong1 He2 Gong1* = grand~harmony~temple) is a Lama temple. Chinese think Moon Goddess lives in 廣寒宮 (*guang3 han2 gong1* = large~frigid~palace in the moon). 子宮 (*zi3 gong1* = son/child's~palace) = uterus.

宮女 (*gong1 nü3* = palace~women = palace maids) serve king's 後宮 (*hou4 gong1* = rear-section-of~palace = harem). Verb 宮 means castrate. 宮人 (*gong1 ren2* = palace~persons) = eunuchs. 宮刑 (*gong1 xing2* = castrate~torture/punishment) removes convict's penis.

by Diana Yue