

# Character Builder

# 您好嗎? 呀

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 kindergartens



Putonghua pronunciation: *tong2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *tung4*

Meaning: child, virgin

童 (radical 立 *li4*, stand) = 兒童 (*er2 tong2* = son/child-children), 孩童 (*hai2 tong2* = child-children). 童年 (*tong2 nian2* = child-years) = childhood. 童子軍 (*tong2 zi0 jun1* = child-diminutive-army) = boy/girl-scout.

Teachers like 童真 (*tong2 zhen1* = children's-sincerity/innocence/naivety), not 頑童 (*wan2 tong2* = naughty-kids). 童心 (*tong2 xin1* = child's-heart) means child/adult's playful/childlike sentiments, but 童身 (*tong2 shen1* = child's-body) means boy/girl/adult's virginity. 戀童癖 (*lian3 tong2 pi3* = love-child-obsession) = pedophilia.

幼童 (*you4 tong2* = young-children) attend 幼稚園 (*you4 zhi4 yuan2* = young-small-garden = kindergarten). Chinese moral 幼吾幼以及人之幼 (*you4 wu2 you4 yi3 ji2 ren2 zhi1 you4* = young-our-young-and-also-people-'s-young = love our own children and other children too) reflects UNICEF's aims.

by Diana Yue