

# 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 the underclass



Putonghua pronunciation: *jian4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jin6*

Meanings: cheap, low, debased, under-valued

Both having radical 貝 (*bei4*, sea-shells/money), 賤 (cheap/debased), 貴 (*gui4*, dear/valuable/high-status) are opposites: 貴價 (*gui4 jia4* = high-price/worth), 賤價 (*jian4 jia4* = cheap~ price/worth). Bankrupt tycoon 賤賣 (*jian4 mai4* = cheap-sell = slashes prices to sell) assets. 穀賤傷農 (*gu3 jian4 shang1 nong2* = grains~cheap~hurt~farmers) means over-supply of grains is making prices plunge and harming crop-growers' earnings.

賤 has fatalistic/value-judgment connotations. Slave/orphan sighs: “我命賤! (*wo3 ming4 jian4* = I'm~born~worthless~underling!” Moralists call woman sleeping around 淫賤 (*yin2 jian4* = lascivious/ slutty~cheap). Public slams pedophiles as 下賤 (*xia4 jian4* = low/base~cheap/despicable).

Fundamentally, 人無分貴賤 (*ren2 wu2 fen1 gui4 jian4* = people~not~divided-into~valuable~cheap = everyone is equal in value). However, India still has 賤民 (*jian4 min2* = cheap~masses = untouchables).

by Diana Yue