

# 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 drugs and medicines

Putonghua pronunciation: wan2

Cantonese pronunciation: yuen2

Meanings: pill, pellet, bead, bolus, small ball

丸 (homophone of 圓 wan2, round/circle) means petite sphere/ball: 丸子 (wan2 zi0 = round-diminutive), 肉丸 (rou4 wan2 = meat~balls), 湯丸 (tang1 wan2 = soup~balls = boiled dough-balls). 彈弓 (dan4 gong1 = bounce~bow = slingshot) and 泥丸 (ni2 wan2 = mud~pellets) is kid's weapon.

Doctors prescribe 藥丸 (yao4 wan2 = medicinal-pills/bolus). 臘丸 (la4 wan2 = wax~pellet) = powdered-medicine in spherical wax case. Pessimists need 定心丸 (ding4 xin1 wan2 = steady-heart~pill = reassuring message/promise).

Hong Kong, though 彈丸之地 (dan4 wan2 zhi1 di4 = sling~pellet-'s-land = tiny place), has colorful colloquialisms: 食丸 (shi2 wan2 = Cantonese sik6 yuen2 = eat~pills) = take contraceptives; 食丸仔 (shi2 wan2 zai3 = Cantonese sik2 yuen2 jai2 = take~pill-diminutive) = take drugs.

by Diana Yue