

# 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 filial piety

先

Putonghua pronunciation: *xian1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sin1*

Meanings: previous, earlier, predecessor, bygone, deceased

先 means earlier/deceased: family's 先人 (*xian1 ren2* = earlier-people = ancestors), widow's 先夫 (*xian1 fu1* = late-husband), student's 先師 (*xian1 shi1* = late-teacher). 爭先恐後 (*zeng1 xian1 kong3 hou4* = compete-for-ahead-afraid-of-behind) describes people scrambling for rations/seats. 先發制人 (*xian1 fa1 zhi4 ren2* = earlier-launch-control-people) = pre-emptive move/strategy.

先生 (*xian1 sheng1* = earlier-born) is honorific for man/teacher/lady-scholar. 先知 (*xian1 zhi1* = beforehand-know = prophet) is nation's 先驅 (*xian1 qu1* = front-rider = herald/pioneer) preaching 先進 (*xian1 jin4* = early-proceed = advanced) thought. Revolution's 先烈 (*xian1 lie4* = deceased/killed-violent) = revolutionary martyrs. 孫中山 (*Sun1 Zhong1 Shan1* = Sun Yat-sen) is 革命先行者 (*ge2 ming4 xian1 xing2 zhe3* = change-fate-early-walk-person = pioneer of Chinese Revolution).

by Diana Yue