

# 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 Foolish Old Man

Putonghua pronunciation: *gong1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gung1*

Meanings: oldster, respectable senior

公 = man of high generation/rank: 叔公 (*shu1 gong1* = uncle~grand-oldster = grand-uncle), 外公 (*wai4 gong1* = external~grand-oldster = grandpa on mother's side). Woman's 公公 (*gong1 gong1* = oldster~oldster), 婆婆 (*po2 po2* = grandma~grandma) are her father- and mother-in-law. Colloquially, 老公 (*lao3 gong1* = old~oldster), 老婆 (*lao3 po2* = old~grandma) mean husband, wife.

公爵 (*gong1 jue2* = oldster~noble-title) = duke. Octogenarians are 老公公 (*lao3 gong1 gong0* = old~grandpa~grandpa), 老婆婆 (*lao3 po2 po0* = old~grandma~grandma).

Chinese mythology features 土地公 (*tu3 di4 gong1* = earth-land~oldster = local god living underground), 雷公 (*lei2 gong1* = thunder~god). 天公 (*tian1 gong1* = heaven~oldster = God of Sky) helped 愚公 (*yu2 gong1* = foolish~old-man) to move mountains away.

by Diana Yue