

# 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 doors

Putonghua pronunciation: *men2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *moon4*

Meanings: door, gate, arch, branch, division

Ideogram 門 shows left-right symmetrical door-panels. Buildings' occupants 進門 (*jin4 men2* = enter~door-mouth) = enter), 出門 (*chu1 men2* = exit~door = exit). Graft-payers 走後門 (*zou3 hou4 men2* = walk-back~door = use bribes/guanxi to get things done).

Kungfu has many 門派 (*men2 pai4* = door~branch = schools). Beginners start with 入門 (*ru4 men2* = enter~door = primary level). 門徒 (*men2 tu2* = school~disciple) = student/disciple.

門 also means traditional-style city gates/arches: Beijing's 天安門 (*tian1 an1 men2* = sky~tranquil~gate = Gate of Heavenly Peace), Paris' 凱旋門 (*kai3 xuan2 men2* = victory~return~gate = Arch of Triumph). 《羅生門》 (*luo2 sheng1 men2*, transliteration of title of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's novella Rashomon), means an event clouded in different contradictory, audience-baffling accounts.

by Diana Yue