

# Character Builder

# 您好嗎? 呀

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 fiscal cliff

Putonghua pronunciation: *xüan2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yuen4*

Meanings: hang, hanging, suspended

懸 (radical 系 *xi4*, silk/bind) means hang/suspend. Painting 懸掛 (*xüan2 gua4* = is-suspended-hung) on wall. Police 懸賞 (*xüan2 xiang3* = hangs/offers-reward) to catch criminal. Air contains 懸浮粒子 (*xüan2 fu2 li1 zi3* = hang-float-grain-diminutive = suspended particles).

Preacher 口若懸河 (*kou3 ruo4 xüan2 he2* = mouth-resembles-hanging-river = babbles non-stop), calls delinquents/sinners to 臨崖勒馬 (*lin2 ya2 le4 ma3* = reach-cliff-pull-back/constrict-horse = halt/hold back).

Rich and poor have 懸殊 (*xüan2 shu1* = hang-differ = hugely differently) assets. Facing 財政懸崖 (*cai2 zheng4 xüan2 ya2* = money-administration-hanging-cliff = fiscal cliff), people have 懸念 (*xüan2 nian4* = hanging-idea = unanswered query/curiosity/concern): Why is budget package 懸而不決 (*xüan2 er2 bu4 jue2* = hang-and-no-decide = hanging in mid-air, undecided)?

by Diana Yue