

# 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 dental care

洞

Putonghua pronunciation: *dong4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *dung6*

Meanings: hole, pit, cavity

Noun 洞 (radical 宀 = 水 *shui3*, water) indicates water-eroded hole/cavity: 岩洞 (*yan2 dong4* = rock-hole = hole in rocky cliff), 洞口 (*dong4 kou3* = hole-mouth = cave's opening). Train 穿山洞 (*chuan1 shan1 dong4* = pierce-hill-hole = passes through tunnel). Machine 鑽洞 (*zhuan4 dong4* = drills-holes). 空洞無物 (*kong1 dong4 wu2 wu4* = empty-hole-no-thing) describes empty speech/thinking.

Verb 洞 means penetrate/pierce. Nail 洞穿 (*dong4 chuan1* = hole-pierce = pierces) wall. Analyst 洞察 (*dong4 cha2* = hole-detect = detects/penetrates) problem. Seer 洞悉天機 (*dong4 xi1 tian1 ji1* = hole-know~heaven~chance = perceives/understands heaven's secret). However, 洞房 (*dong4 fang2* = hole-room) means newly-weds spending first night in bed.

Poor oral hygiene causes 牙洞 (*ya2 dong4* = dental-cavities).

by Diana Yue