

# 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 first-home purchases

比

Putonghua pronunciation: *bi3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *bei2*

Meaning: compare, liken, comparison, comparative, compete, ratio, than

比 (showing two 匕 *bi4*, spoon-feed) means 比較 (*bi3 jiao4* = compare-compete), 對比 (*dui4 bi3* = match/contrast-compare), 百分比 (*bai2 fen4 bi3* = hundred-parts-compare = percentage) is 比例 (*bi3 li4* = comparative-ratio). 比賽 (*bi3 sai4* = compare-compete) = competition/race.

Speculators watch commodities' 比價 (*bi3 jia4* = comparative-prices). Gold 比不上 (*bi3 bu4 shang4* = compare-not-up = can't compare with) platinum, gets 比下去 (*bi3 xia4 qu4* = compare-down-go = lower/inferior by comparison).

比喻 (*bi3 yu4* = comparison-metaphor) likens 500-sq.ft. apartments to 蝸居 (*wu1 ju1* = snail's/tiny-abode). Still, 比上不足, 比下有餘 (*bi3 shang4 bu4 zu2, bi3 xia4 you3 yu2* = compared-to-top-not-enough, compared-to-bottom-has-extra = it's not the best, but it's better than the worst!

by Diana Yue