

# 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 right and wrong

是

Putonghua pronunciation: *shi4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *si6*

Meanings: is, are, yes, right

是 = is: 我是神 (*wo3 shi4 shen2* = I-am-God). Sceptic asks: 是友是敵? (*shi4 you3 shi4 di2* = is~friend-is~enemy = Is he friend or foe?), 是真是假? (*shi4 zhen1 shi4 jia3* = is~real/true-is~unreal/false = Can this be true/real?)

是誰? (*shi4 shei2* = is~who) = Who is it? 是不是? (*shi4 bu4 shi4* = is~not-is = Is that so? 是! (*shi2*, is) = Yes/right/correct! 不是! (*bu4 shi4*, not-is) = No! 賠不是 (*pei2 bu4 shi4* = pay-damages~not~right) means apologizing for fault/offence.

不是人 (*bu4 shi4 ren2* = no~is~human) describes cruel/treacherous characters. 一無是處 (*yi4 wu2 shi4 chu4* = one/completely~has-no-right~place/thing) = good-for-nothing. Exclamation 真是! (*zhen1 shi4* = real-is) = Really!