

# 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 Flaming Mountains

Putonghua pronunciation: *biann4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *bin3*

Meanings: change, transform, transformation

變 = 變化 (*bian4 hua4* = change-transformation), 變遷 (*bian4 qian1* = change-move-away = change situation/status): 變好 (*bian4 hao3* = change-for-better), 變壞 (*bian4 huai4* = change-for-worse). Husband 變心 (*bian4 xin1* = changes-heart, loves another). 政變 (*zheng4 bian4* = political-change/coup) causes 變天 (*bian4 tian1* = change-sky = weather/regime change).

Magician/illusionist 變走 (*bian4 zou3* = change-run/gone = vanishes) tiger. 變臉 (*bian4 lian3* = changing-face) means turn hostile or Sichuan opera's specialty: singer's imperceptibly-quick changing of opera-mask.

Monkey knows 七十二變 (*qi1 shi2 er4 bian4* = seven-ten-two-changes = seventy-two/endless ways of self-transforming disguises), 變成 (*bian4 cheng2* = changes/turns-into) a fly, flies into Iron Fan Princess's stomach, upsets it, makes her 色變 (*se1 bian4* = color/countenance-change = grow pale with fear).

by Diana Yue