

# 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 Qin Dynasty

短

Putonghua pronunciation: *duan3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *duen2*

Meanings: short, lack

短 (矢 *chi3*, arrow + 豆 *dou4*, bean) means short: 短髮 (*duan3 fa3* = short-hair), 短期 (*duan3 qi1* = short-term), 短缺 (*duan3 que1* = short-of-lacking). 五短身裁 (*wu3 duan3 shen1 cai2* = five~short~body~measurements) describes a shorty. Gossiper 說人長短 (*shuo1 ren2 chang2 duan3* = talk/comment~people~long~short = gabber about others' trivialities).

人生苦短 (*ren2 sheng1 ku3 duan3* = person's-life~bitterly~short) = life is lamentably short. 三長兩短 (*san1 chang2 liang3 duan3* = three-long~two-short = fatal mishaps) are unpredictable.

Qin's First Emperor 短命 (*duan3 ming4* = short-live/life = lived a short life, died in 210 B.C., aged 49). 秦祚短 (*Qin2 zuo4 duan3* = Qin~state's-duration~short = Qin Dynasty was short, only lasted 14 years, up to 207 B.C.)