

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:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th 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

對

Putonghua pronunciation: *dui4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *dui3*

Meanings: right, facing, pair

對 (identical pair) means 對稱 (*dui4 cheng4* = pair-balance = symmetrical), 相襯 (*xiang1 chen4* = mutual-match = matching), hence fitting/correct/right.

說得對! (*shuo4 de0 dui4* = say~effectively~right) = What you said is right!
做得對! (*zuo4 de0 dui4* = do~effectively~right) = You did the right thing!
對不對? (*dui4 bu4 dui4* = right~no~right) = Is that right?
不對! (*bu4 dui4* = no~right = wrong) also means “Wait a sec - there’s something wrong/fishy here!”

對 means face/facing. 對不起 (*dui4 bu4 qi3* = face~no~afford = feel ashamed/undeserved) = apology “Sorry!” or “has disadvantaged/wronged” someone. Denying fault/infidelity, spouse/partner says: 我對得起你! (*wo3 dui4 de0 qi3 ni3* = I~face~effectively~afford~you = To you, I’m faultless, conscience-clean!)