

Written Chinese isn't phonetic – the writing doesn't indicate sound in the way that our alphabet does.

Whilst Chinese people write their language with characters, the phonetic system *pinyin* is increasingly used by them – mainly to use modern technologies. It's also a helpful tool for learners of Chinese – especially in the early days of learning.

Pinyin is a way of writing Chinese with our alphabet.

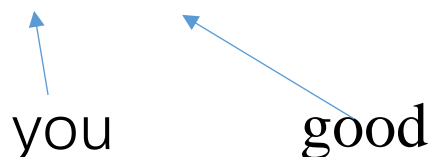
The marks over some vowels are called 'tone marks' (not 'accents'!). They are VERY helpful as they show the rise / fall (tone) of your voice. There are 4 tones in Mandarin, plus a neutral tone.

wǒ = I

shì = am (the verb 'to be')

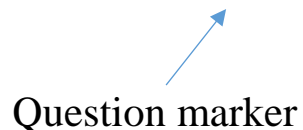
nǐ hǎo = hello

you good



nǐ hǎo ma? = How are you?

Question marker



wǒ hěn hǎo, xièxiè = I'm fine, thank you

xièxiè = thanks (or thank you)

We looked at a few characters:

Woman nǚ

女

To remember this character it helps to associate the shape with the meaning, so look at the character and see a woman striding along with her arms stretched out.

中 = middle

Zhōng

guó = land, country. (We'll learn this character another time).

So zhōng guó = middle country or **China**

文

= wén = language, written language

So 中文 = zhōng wén = middle language or **Chinese**

Our conversation in characters – and then in pinyin:

你好

你好

你好吗？

我很好，谢谢你。你好吗？

我很好，谢谢

Nǐ hǎo

Nǐ hǎo

Nǐ hǎo ma?

Wǒ hěn hǎo, xièxiè nǐ. Nǐ hǎo ma?

Wǒ hěn hǎo, xièxiè

Tones

Mandarin is a tonal language. There aren't so many different 'sounds' in Chinese so they use and re-use the ones that exist. Different tones are one way to maximise the range of meanings you can create with the same sounds. Although it sounds a bit scary, the fact is that we all use the 4 tones of Mandarin when we are speaking English – just for different purposes.

The 4 tones of Mandarin are all present in English intonation.

The first tone is like singing a high (ish note) – high and flat

The second tone rises up – as when we question something: *Huh? What?*

The third tone is very low – like a very sceptical “*Really??*”

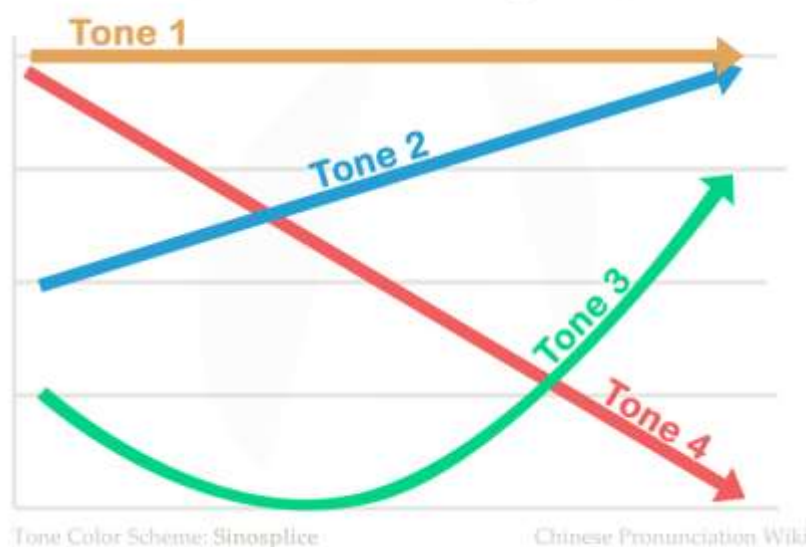
The fourth tone sounds a bit angry and falls from high to low:

“*No!*” “*Stop!*” “*Now!*”

Try them all out using the sound ‘ma’ or ‘ba’

Mandarin Chinese Tone Countours

(standard textbook depiction)



See you next time!

下次见！