

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

A diagram illustrating the components of the Chinese phrase 'nǐ hǎo'. The word 'nǐ' is positioned above the word 'you', and a blue arrow points from 'you' up to 'nǐ'. The word 'hǎo' is positioned above the word 'good', and a blue arrow points from 'good' up to 'hǎo'.

nǐ hǎo ma? = How are you?

Question marker

A diagram showing the question marker 'ma?' in the phrase 'nǐ hǎo ma?'. A blue arrow points from the text 'Question marker' below up to the 'ma?' part of the phrase above.

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

xièxiè = thanks (or thank you)

= good bye (literally: ‘again see’)

We looked at a few characters:

One

一 yī

Two èr

二

Three sān

sān sì kǒu nǚ ma mǎ kǒu

三

Four sì

四

Mouth kǒu

口

Horse mǎ

马

Woman nǚ

女

We also saw how characters can be composed of different bits put together.

For example:

Ma – question marker

吗



The ‘mouth’ hints at the meaning, the ‘horse’ hints at the pronunciation

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’