

Introduction to Chinese Tones

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Focus: Mandarin Chinese (Standard Mandarin)

1. Why Tones Matter

- Mandarin is a **tonal language**: pitch contour changes the meaning of a syllable even when the consonant?vowel (CV) structure is identical.
- Mispronouncing a tone can turn a word into a completely different word (or an unintelligible utterance).
- Mastery of tones is essential for:
 - Clear communication
 - Listening comprehension
 - Accurate spelling in pinyin (tone marks)

2. The Four Main Tones + Neutral Tone

Tone	Symbol (pinyin)	Pitch Contour (visual)	Description	Example (pinyin?? English)
1st	? (high? level)	———— (steady high)	High, steady, unchanging pitch.	m? (?) – “mother”
2nd	? (rising)	? (low ? high)	Starts mid?low, rises like a question in English.	má (?) – “hemp”
3rd	? (fall? rise)	?? (mid ? low ? mid)	Starts mid, dips down, then rises. In natural speech often shortened to a low?level tone when followed by another tone.	m? (?) – “horse”
4th	? (falling)	? (high ? low)	Sharp, falling pitch, like a command or exclamation.	mà (?) – “to scold”
Neutral (no mark)	• (light, short)		Unstressed, pitch determined by the preceding tone; short and weak.	ma (?) – question particle

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Tip: Visualize the contours as a “tone graph” on a staff: 1st = flat line, 2nd = upward slant, 3rd = dip?then?rise, 4th = steep drop.

3. Tone Sandhi (Tone Changes in Context)

Rule	Condition	Resulting Tone(s)	Example
3rd?tone sandhi	Two consecutive 3rd tones	First 3rd becomes 2nd tone	n? h?o ? ní h?o (??)
“?” (bù) change	Followed by 4th tone	Becomes 2nd tone	bù h?o ? bú h?o (??)
“?” (y?) change	Followed by 4th tone ? 2nd tone; otherwise 4th tone	Adjusts to avoid tone clash	y? ge ? yí gè (??) ; y? ti? n ? yì tí?n (??)
Neutralization	When a syllable is unstressed (often in compounds)	Becomes neutral tone	sh? b? (??) ? sh? ba (book bar)

4. Practical Tips for Learning Tones

1. Listen & Imitate

- Use recordings (audio books, language apps) and repeat immediately.
- Focus on pitch contour, not just volume.

2. Visual Aids

- Plot the pitch on a smartphone app (e.g