

## Sounds

In today's class, we are going to focus on sounds, pronunciation and tones. In order to help learners read characters, the **Pinyin alphabet** was created. It is basically the transliteration of each character using the latin alphabet with the addition of tone stresses to know how to pronounce them correctly.

ex: 汉语 → in pinyin, we read it **hànyǔ** [the Chinese language]

文化 → in pinyin, we read it **wénhuà** [the Chinese culture]

But before we even work on tones, let's focus a bit on the Pinyin alphabet as it will be essential for the rest of the Chinese language learning.

### 1) Finals in Pinyin

A Final is a term referring to the second part of a Chinese syllable. It is composed of one or several vowels + the consonant "n", "ng" or "r". Most finals are combined with an Initial<sup>1</sup> to create a syllable. This syllable will represent the sound of a character. There are 38 finals in Mandarin.



Every Mandarin syllable must have a Final!

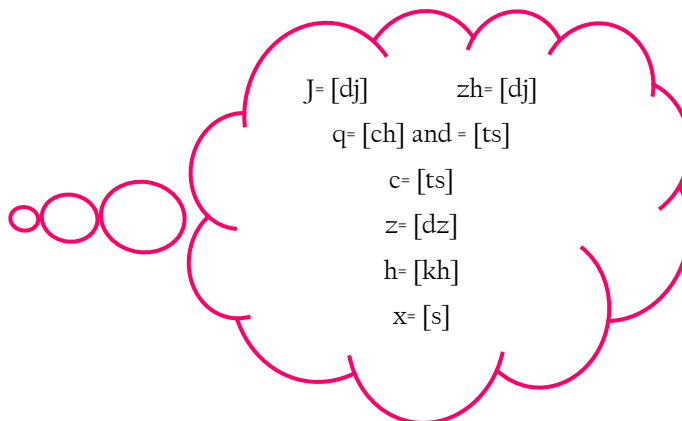
|     |          |          |     |
|-----|----------|----------|-----|
|     | i        | u        | ü   |
| a   | ia       | ua       |     |
| o   |          | uo       | üe  |
| e   | ie       |          |     |
| er  |          |          |     |
| ai  |          |          |     |
| ei  |          |          |     |
| ao  | iao      |          |     |
| ou  | iou (iu) |          |     |
| an  | ian      | uan      | üan |
| en  | in       | uen (un) | üen |
| ang | iang     | uang     |     |
| eng | ieng     | ueng     |     |
| ong | iong     |          |     |

<sup>1</sup> See #2 Initials

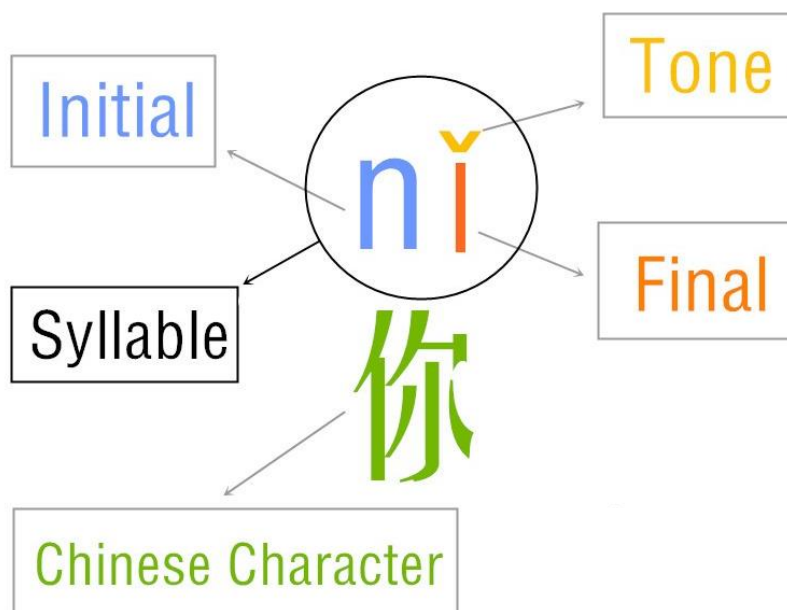
## 2) Initials

Conversely, Initials can be found at the beginning of a syllable. There are 21 initials in Pinyin which are consonants of the Latin alphabet. See in the table below as well as the pronunciation of some particular consonants, here on the right:

|    |    |    |   |
|----|----|----|---|
| B  | P  | M  | F |
| D  | T  | N  | L |
| G  | K  | H  |   |
| J  | Q  | X  |   |
| Z  | C  | S  |   |
| Zh | Ch | Sh | R |



✚ Let's recap thanks to a simple and visual example!

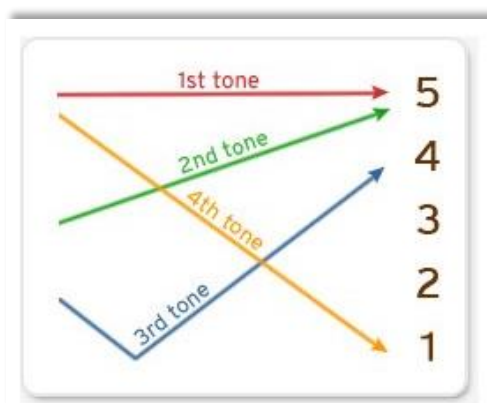


## 3) The 4 tones

Tones are extremely important in Chinese, and many other Asian languages. When one does not see a written character, it is the pronunciation of the syllable that will make a Native speaker understand what you are saying. In other words, there are 4 tones in Mandarin Chinese (well, 5 but one is neutral so it doesn't really count) which you need to differentiate and practise until you completely master them. It is maybe one of the trickiest things for a Westerner to do in this language as well as writing characters.

Let's have a look at them!

- + 1<sup>st</sup> tone: — : a straight and horizontal line on top of the vowel. It has a high and constant sound, naturally lengthened ex: **mā**
- + 2<sup>nd</sup> tone: / : a rising diagonal line on top of the vowel. It is a rising tone. It goes from low to high, like when asking a question ex: **má**
- + 3<sup>rd</sup> tone: ✓ : a curved “dipping” line. Like the shape of a little ditch, the voice has to go down and then up ex: **mǎ**
- + 4<sup>th</sup> tone: \ : a falling line on top of the vowel. It is a falling tone that starts out very high and falls out very short and strong ex: **mà**



: stresses are always on vowels!

The neutral tone is never marked with any stress → **ma**

To show you how important the tone of a syllable is in the meaning of a word, let's take our previous example **ma** and see its different translations

|           |           |           |           |                  |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------|
| <b>mā</b> | <b>má</b> | <b>mǎ</b> | <b>mà</b> | ma               |
| 妈         | 麻         | 马         | 骂         | 吗                |
| mother    | fibre     | horse     | curse     | question<br>mark |