基础二 · Hear and practise the four tones

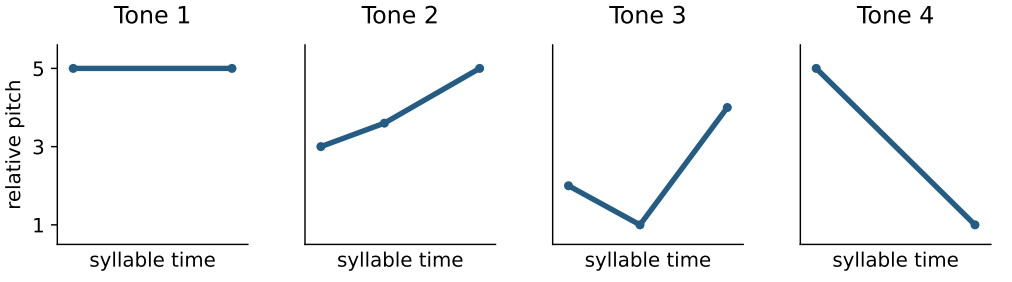
Chinese Foundations

A purchase changes with its tone

At a market, **买 mǎi** means buy and **卖 mài** means sell. The initial and final are the same; the tone changes the word. Practise the contrast before putting it into a longer sentence.

Four tones and a light syllable

Tone	Basic practice shape	Example
First	high and level	妈 mā, mother
Second	rising	麻 má, hemp
Third	low; a full dip and rise when practised alone	马 mǎ, horse
Fourth	falling	骂 mà, scold
Neutral	short and unstressed; pitch depends on context	the second ma in 妈妈 māma



The diagram is a practice guide, not a fixed musical score. Speakers have different pitch ranges. Third tone often stays low before another syllable; do not force a full rise into every word. An English question intonation is not a reliable substitute for Mandarin second tone.

Put the mark on the right vowel

Use this spelling procedure: mark a if present; otherwise mark e; in ou mark o; in other multi-vowel finals mark the last vowel. Examples: **hǎo**, **xiè**, **dōu**, **liù**, **shuǐ**. A marked i loses its dot, as in nǐ. A neutral syllable has no tone mark.

For practice, match numbered forms to marks: ma1 → mā; ma2 → má; ma3 → mǎ; ma4 → mà. Numbers are a study notation; a normal pinyin input method usually

takes unmarked letters.

Compare one feature at a time

Start with mǎi / mài: buy / sell. Then try **四 sì**, four, and **十 shí**, ten. The second pair changes both the initial and the tone, so a mistake cannot automatically be blamed on tone alone.

Say **我要买书。Wǒ yào mǎi shū.** I want to buy books. Then **他卖书。Tā mài shū.** He sells books. Keep the word's tone while speaking the whole message. Use a recording or teacher feedback for sound; use the answer key for spelling and meaning.

A fresh situation

R1. Interpret and repair. A classmate writes shǔi and lìu. Correct both marks and explain the choice.

R2. Use it yourself. Write the marked forms of hao3, xie4 and dou1, then state the meaning difference between mai3 and mai4.

Write your responses before opening the key. Compare meaning as well as form; a different valid answer need not copy the model.

Answers and explanations

Check after your attempt. For open tasks, compare the message and the stated criteria, then revise one detail.

■ Fresh-situation answers

R1. Write shuǐ and liù. In ui and iu the mark goes on the last vowel; they do not both mark i. The tone changes spelling position, not the word's vowel order.

R2. One possible response. Hǎo, xiè, dōu. Mǎi 买 means buy; mài 卖 means sell. Mark a first if present, otherwise e, and o in ou. Practise the spoken contrast with a reliable model.

Recall later. Later, mark a, e, ou, iu and ui examples from memory, then check each.