

Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about history

Putonghua pronunciation: *shǐ*3

Cantonese pronunciation: *si*2

Meanings: history, story

史 = 歷史 (*lǐ*4 *shǐ*3 = pass/experience~story) = history. 史前人 (*shǐ*3 *qián*2 *rén*2 = history~previous~person) = prehistoric man. 史家 (*shǐ*3 *jiā*1 = history~master/scholar = historians) collate 史料 (*shǐ*3 *liào*4 = historical~materials), write 史書 (*shǐ*3 *shū*1 = history~books).

Playboy boasts 風流史 (*fēng*1 *liú*2 *shǐ*3 = wind~flow~history = affairs with women). Migrant workers tell 辛酸史 (*xīn*1 *suān*1 *shǐ*3 = bitter~sour~history = heart-wrenching experiences).

Chinese 現代史 (*xiàn*4 *dài*4 *shǐ*3 = now~period~history = modern history) is 血淚史 (*xuè*3 *lèi*4 *shǐ*3 = blood~tears~history = series of wounds and sorrows). We should 以史為鑑 (*yǐ*3 *shǐ*3 *wéi*2 *jiàn*4 = use~history~as~mirror = reflect on history's lessons), 創造歷史 (*chuàng*4 *zào*4 *lǐ*4 *shǐ*3 = create~make~history = make new history/breakthroughs).

by Diana Yue