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 World Expo

Putonghua pronunciation: guan3
Cantonese pronunciation: goon2
Meanings: house, building, pavilion

館 (radical食 shi2, eat/food) has eating/living/special facilities. 旅館 (lü2 guan3 = travel-house) = inn/hostel. 醫館 (yi1 guan3 = doctor-house) = traditional Chinese medical clinic. 使館 (shi4 guan2 = envoy-building) = embassy/consulate. 吃館子 (chi1 guan3 zhi0 = eat-restaurant-diminutive) = eat at restaurant.

博物館 (bo2 wu4 guan3 = broad-things-building = museums), 美術館 (mei3 shu4 guan3 = beauty-method-building = art galleries), 圖書館 (tu2 shu1 guan3 = picture-book-building = libraries) have 館藏 (guan3 cang2 = building-hold/hoard = collections).

World Expo's 展覽館 (zhan3 lan3 guan3 = show-see-building = exhibition pavilions) display 展品 (zhan3 pin3 = exhibit-objects/items = exhibits): 文物 (wen2 wu4 = writing/culture-objects = cultural relics), 新發明 (xin1 fa1 ming2 = new-develop-enlighten = new inventions).

by Diana Yue