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 Genesis

紀
Putonghua pronunciation: ji4
Cantonese pronunciation: gei2
Meanings: record, geological period

紀 = record/time-period: 紀事 (ji4 shi4 = record-events = recordkeeping), 紀念 (ji4 nian4 = record-remember = commemoration), 侏羅紀 (zhu1 luo2 ji4 = “Jurassic”-transliterated-geological-period).

In “創世紀” (chuang4 shi4 ji4 = create-world-record/period = Genesis), 神 (shen2, God) created 光 (guang1, light), 天地萬物 (tian1 di4 wan4 wu4 = heaven-earth-ten-thousand-things = the world and everything in it). 阿當夏娃 (A4 Dang1 Xia4 Wa1 = “Adam” “Eve”-transliterated) lived in 伊甸園 (Yi1 Dian4 yuan2 = “Eden”-garden = Garden of Eden) until 蛇 (she2, snake/serpent) tempted them to eat 禁果 (jin4 guo3 = forbidden-fruit).

Fundamentalists uphold 創造論 (chuang4 zao4 lun4 = create-make-discuss = creation theory). Darwinists advocate 進化論 (jin4 hua4 lun4 = progress-transform-discuss = evolution theory).

by Diana Yue