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 Moses crossing the Red Sea

出
Putonghua pronunciation: chu1
Cantonese pronunciation: chut1
Meanings: emerge, exit, out, leave

Ideogram 出 indicates sprouting/emerging plants. 出現 (chu1 xian4 = emerge-show) = appear. 出發 (chu1 fa1 = out-leave) = depart. 出差 (chu1 chai1 = depart-errand/mission) = away on business trip. 出入 (chu1 ru4 = exit-enter) also means account/calculation’s discrepancy.

出身 (chu1 shen1 = come-out-body) means person’s social position at birth. 出版 (chu1 ban3 = bring-out-edition) = publish. Monk/nun 出家 (chu1 jia1 = leave-home, join monastery/ convent).

Christianity's 舊約聖經 (jiu4 yue4 sheng4 jing1 = old-contract-holy-scripture = Old Testament Bible) recorded 以色列 (yi3 se1 lie4 = “Israel”-transliterated)'s history. In 出埃及記 (chu1 ai1 ji2 ji4 = out-“Egypt”-transliterated-record) = Book of Exodus, 先知 (xian1 zhi1 = previous-know = prophet) Moses led Israelites逃出 (tao2 chu1 = escape-out-of) Egypt.

by Diana Yue