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 libraries

Putonghua pronunciation: shu1
Cantonese pronunciation: sue1
Meanings: writing script, calligraphy, document, book, letter

Libraries house 書籍 (shu1 ji2 = book-register = books), 期刊 (qi1 kan4 = period-publish = periodicals), 影音材料 (ying3 yin1 cai2 liao4 = shadow-sound-wood-material = audio-visual materials), purchase 新書 (xin1 shu1 = new-books).

藏書家 (chang2 shu1 jia1 = hoard-book-master = book collectors) study 舊書 (jiu4 shu1 = old-books), 古書 (gu3 shu1 = ancient-books), 出版者 (chu1 ban2 zhe3 = out-printing-board-person = publishers), 版本 (ban2 ben3 = printing-board-base = editions), collect 善本 (shan2 ben3 = good-base = good editions), 孤本 (gu1 ben3 = orphan-base = only/rare copies), 禁書 (jin4 shu1 = banned-books).

2,200 years ago the Chinese Emperor 灘書坑儒 (fen2 shu1 keng1 ru2 = burn-book-bury-alive-Confucianist = ordered banning/ destruction of Confucian scholars/writings), causing controversy.

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