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

((radical 食 shi2 = eat)

Putonghua pronunciation: guan3

Cantonese pronunciation: goon2

Meanings: house, guesthouse, lodge, building, eatery, etc.

館 = special purpose building: 博物館 (bo2 wu4 guan3 = broad-things-building = museum), 美術館 (mei3 shu1 guan3 = beauty-method-building = art gallery), 圖書館 (tu2 shu1 guan3 = picture-book-building = library), 大使館 (da4 shi4 guan2 = big-envoy-building = ambassador’s building = embassy).

館長 manages 館藏 (guan3 chang2 = building-hoard = museum/gallery/library’s collections), plans 展覽 (zhan2 lan3 = show-look = exhibitions). Library's 圖書管理員 (tu2 shu1 guan2 li3 yuan2 = picture-book-control-manage-person = librarians) handle 借書 (jie4 shu1 = lending/borrowing-of-books), 還書 (huan2 shu1 = returning-of-books), 編目 (bian1 mu4 = edit/collate-item = cataloguing).

飯館 (fan4 guan3 = cooked-rice-house) = eatery/restaurant. 上館子 (shang4 guan3 zi0 = mount-restaurant-diminutive = eating out) is nice, if affordable.

by Diana Yue