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 \ 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 storytelling

書 (Putonghua pronunciation: shu1) Cantonese pronunciation: sue1

書 (radical 日 yue1, say) means book/writings/document: 書店 (shu1 dian4 = book-shop), 閱書 (xian2 shu1 = leisure-reading), 禁書 (jin4 shu1 = banned-books), 兵書 (bing1 shu1 = army-books = military writings). 書生 (shu1 sheng1 = bookish/scholarly-men) 研究 (du2 shu1 = read/study-books).

書呆子 (shu1 dai1 zio = book-idiot-diminutive = 書蟲 shu1 chong2 = book-worm/nerd) loves 看書 (kan4 shu1 = reading/flipping-through-books): 古書 (gu3 shu1 = ancient-books/records), 故事書 (gu4 shi4 shu1 = old-event-book = story books), 畫書 (hua4 shu1 = picture/art-books),

Chinese kids read 小人書 (xiao3 ren2 shu1 = little-people-books = palm-size story books with sequential drawings). 聽說書 (ting1 shuo4 shu1 = hear-say/speak-book = listening to storytellers recite traditional novels in dialect) is popular past-time.

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