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 Revolution of 1911

血 = 血液 (xüe4 yi4 = blood-liquid = blood). Workers earn wages with 血汗 (xüe4 han4 = blood-and-sweat). Artists paint with 心血 (xin1 xüe4 = heart-blood = mental/spiritual energy/dedication). Great novels/movies feature 有血有肉 (you3 xüe4 you3 rou4 = has-blood-has-flesh = vivid/realistic) characters. 冷血 (leng3 xüe4 = cold-blooded) oppressors commit 血腥 (xüe4 xing1 = bloody-stinking) crimes. 血流成河 (xüe4 liu2 cheng2 he2 = blood-flows-forms-streams) describes cruel massacre.

热血 (re4 xüe4 = hot-blood = zealous) patriots 灌熱血 (sa3 re4 xüe4 = spill-hot-blood = sacrifice body/life), vow: 血債血償! (xüe4 zhai4 xüe4 chang2 = blood-debts-blood-repay = Repay blood with blood!), advocate 流血革命 (liu2 xüe4 ge2 ming4 = flow-blood-change-fate = revolution using violence).

by Diana Yue