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 beginning and end

始
Putonghua pronunciation: shi3
Cantonese pronunciation: chi2
Meaning: first, earliest, ensue, begin, beginning, only then

始 (radical 女 nü3, woman) = 開始 (kai1 shi3 = start-begin), 原始 (yuan2 shi3 = original-primitive). Ape/Adam is 人類始祖 (ren2 lei4 shi3 zu3 = man-kind's-first-ancestor). 秦始皇 (Qin2 Huang2 = Qin-Dynasty’s-First-Emperor) founded 秦朝 (Qin2 Chao2 = Qin Dynasty, 221-207 BC). Summer Solstice is 夏之始 (xia4 zhi1 shi3 = summer’s-beginning).

Heartless lover 始亂終棄 (shi3 luan4 zhong1 qi4 = begin-disrupt/invoke-end-abandon = sexually exploits girl, eventually abandons her). Faithful husband 始終如一 (shi3 zhong1 ru2 yi1 = beginning-end-resemble-one = is always constant to wife).

創始人 (chuang4 shi3 ren2 = create-start-person) = founder. Deity proclaims: “I am Alpha and Omega, 我是始 (wo3 shi4 shi3 = I-am-the-beginning), 我是終 (wo3 shi4 zhong1 = I-am-the-end).”

by Diana Yue