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 Qin Dynasty

始
Putonghua pronunciation: shi3
Cantonese pronunciation: chi2
Meanings: first, initial, beginning, only then

始 (radical 女 nü3, female) means 開始 (kai1 shi3 = open-initiate = begin). 原始 (yuan2 shi3 = original-beginning) describes primitive man/society/forests. 始祖 (shi3 zu3 = first-ancestor) = earliest ancestor.

Enterprise's 創始人 (chuang3 shi3 ren2 = create-begin-person = founder) tells 始末 (shi3 mo4 = begin-end = the whole story) of achieving success. 始亂終棄 (shi3 luan4 zhong1 qi4 = begin-sexually-abuse-finally-abandon) describes man abandoning girl after sexual relationship.

秦朝 (Qin2 chao2 = the Qin-Dynasty) 始於 (shi3 yu1 = began-in) 221 B.C. 秦始皇 (Qin2 Shi3 Huang2 = Qin's-First-Emperor)’s tomb contains 兵馬俑 (bing1 ma3 yong3 = soldiers-horses-funerary-figurines = terracotta army). 始作俑者 (shi3 zuo2 yong3 zhe3 = first-to-make-funerary-figurines-person) describes the first person who started a bad/troublesome practice.

by Diana Yue