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

短 (Putonghua pronunciation: duan3 Cantonese pronunciation: duen2)
Meanings: short, lack

短 (矢 chi3, arrow + 豆 dou4, bean) means short: 短髮 (duan3 fa3 = short-hair), 短期 (duan3 qi1 = short-term), 短缺 (duan3 qüe1 = short-of-lacking). 五短身裁 (wu3 duan3 shen1 cai2 = five-short-body-measurements) describes a shorty. Gossiper 說人長短 (shuo1 ren2 chang2 duan3 = talk/comment-people-long-short = gabber about others’ trivialities).

人生苦短 (ren2 sheng1 ku3 duan3 = person’s-life-bitterly-short) = life is lamentably short. 三長兩短 (san1 chang2 liang3 duan3 = three-long-two-short = fatal mishaps) are unpredictable.

Qin’s First Emperor 短命 (duan3 ming4 = short-live/life = lived a short life, died in 210 B.C., aged 49). 秦祚短 (Qin2 zuo4 duan3 = Qin-state’s-duration-short = Qin Dynasty was short, only lasted 14 years, up to 207 B.C.)

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