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 history

史
Putonghua pronunciation: shi3
Cantonese pronunciation: si2
Meanings: history, story

史 = 歷史 (li4 shi3 = pass/experience-story) = history. 史前人 (shi3 qian2 ren2 = history-previous-person) = prehistoric man. 史家 (shi3 jia1 = history-master/scholar = historians) collate 史料 (shi3 liao4 = historical-materials), write 史書 (shi3 shu1 = history-books).

Playboy boasts 風流史 (feng1 liu2 shi3 = wind-flow-history = affairs with women). Migrant workers tell 辛酸史 (xin1 suan1 shi3 = bitter-sour-history = heart-wrenching experiences).

Chinese 現代史 (xian4 dai4 shi3 = now-period-history = modern history) is 血淚史 (xue3 lei4 shi3 = blood-tears-history = series of wounds and sorrows). We should 以史為鏡 (yi3 shi3 wei2 jian4 = use-history-as-mirror = reflect on history's lessons), 創造歷史 (chuang4 zao4 li4 shi3 = create-make-history = make new history/breakthroughs).

by Diana Yue