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 Han people

漢
Putonghua pronunciation: han4
Cantonese pronunciation: hom3
Meaning: man, Han race, Han Dynasty, Chinese

Common noun 漢 (radical 氵= water shui3, water) means man/ chap: 懶漢 (lan3 han4 = lazy-man), 笨漢 (ben4 han4 = stupid/clumsy-man), 好漢 (hao3 han4 = brave/upright-man). 偷漢 (tou1 han4 = steal-man) describes woman’s adulterous behaviour.

漢朝 (Han4 chao2 = Han-Dynasty, 202-220 BC) established empire and powerful cultural influence, hence 漢 means Chinese. 漢人 (Han1 ren2 = Han-people/race) repeated 漢化 (Han4 hua4 = Han-transformed = Sinicized) other races/cultures/religions. 漢學 (Han4 xue2 = Han studies) = Sinology. 漢奸 (Han4 jian1 = Chinese-traitor) = collaborator who betrays China.

漢水 (Han4 shui3 = Han-River) is tributary of 長江 (Chang2 Jiang1 = Long-River, aka Yangtze River). 漢白玉 (Han4 bai2 yu4 = Han-white-jade) is white marble used since Han Dynasty.