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

Putonghua pronunciation: shi4
Cantonese pronunciation: si6
Meanings: occurrence, happening, thing, event, act

事 = occurrence: 史事 (shi3 shi4 = historical-events), 事實 (shi4 shi2 = occurrence-solid/real = facts), 事情 (shi4 qing2 = occurrences-circumstances = happenings/engagements). 辦喜事 (ban4 xi3 shi4 = arrange-happy-event = hosting wedding), 喪事 (sang1 shi4 = loss/death-event = funeral) are 大事 (da4 shi4 = big/important-events/matters).

做好事 (zuo4 hao3 shi4 = do/make-good-things) = doing good. 出事 (chu1 shi4 = come-out-thing) means something bad has happened, e.g. accident/stroke. Acting rashly 壞事 (huai4 shi4 = bad/spoil-thing = ruins plans).

Biographies describe 真人真事 (zhen1 ren2 zhen1 shi4 = real-people-real-events). Japan attacked China in 九一八事件 (jiu3 yi1 ba1 shi4 jian4 = nine-one-eight-happening-piece = Mukden/Manchurian Incident, 18 September 1931). 戰事 (zhan4 shi4 = war-happenings) = war-time fighting.

by Diana Yue