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.

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<th>Putonghua pronunciation</th>
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<th>Meanings</th>
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錄 = 記錄 (ji4 lu4 = note-down-record) = verb/noun record. History is 文字紀錄 (wen2 zi4 ji4 lu4 = writing-character-note-down-record = words/written records). VIP publishes 日記 (ri4 ji4 = day/daily-record = diary). 回憶錄 (hui2 yi1 lu4 = return-remember-record = memoirs).


by Diana Yue