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: ping2
Cantonese pronunciation: ping4
Meanings: comment, criticize, assess


Historian writes 史評 (shi3 ping2 = historical-critique), gives 評價 (ping2 jia4 = critically-assess-value = evaluation): Mao Zedong 功過七三開 (gong1 guo4 qi1 san1 kai1 = achievements-faults-seven-three-split = did more good than harm).

by Diana Yue