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 empires

Putonghua pronunciation: chao2
Cantonese pronunciation: chiu4
Meanings: facing, pay homage visit, emperor's reign-period, court, dynasty

Verb 朝 = facing: 朝東 (chao2 dong1 = facing-east). Vassals 朝見 (chao2 jian4 = facing-see = pay homage/tribute visit to) king. Christian calendar's 三王來朝 (san1 wang2 lai2 chao2 = three-kings-come-pay-tribute) = Epiphany.

Noun 朝 means emperor’s reign-period, 朝廷 (chao2 ting2 = reign/royal-court), 朝代 (chao2 dai4 = reign-generation = ruling dynasties: 秦 Qin2, 漢 Han4, 唐 Tang2, 宋 Song4, 元 Yuan2, 明 Ming2, 清 Qing1). Emperor holds 朝朝 (zao3 chao2 = morning-court = morning court hearings). 兩朝元老 (liang3 chao2 yuan2 lao3 = two-reigns-principal-elder) = minister/executive who served two successive emperors/bosses.

在野黨 (zai4 ye3 dang3 = at-countryside-party) = non-ruling party. Combating national crisis requires 朝野 (chao2 ye3 = court-countryside = ruling politicians and non-ruling political groups)'s co-operation.

by Diana Yue