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

擴
Putonghua pronunciation: kuo4
Cantonese pronunciation: kwong3
Meanings: expand

擴 = 手 (hand) + 廣 (wide): 擴大 (kuo4 da4 = expand-big) quotas,擴建 (kuo4 jian4 = expand-build) premises. 擴音器 (kuo4 yin1 qi4 = expand-sound-instrument) = loudspeaker.

武力擴張 (wu3 li4 kuo4 zhang1 = military-strength-expand-open/stretch) = military expansion. 羅馬帝國 (Luo2 Ma3 di4 guo2 = “Roman”-transliterated-empire) 擴軍 (kuo4 jun1 = expanded-army), 侵略 (qin1 lue4 = invade- snatch = invaded) other states, 擴張版圖 (kuo4 zhang1 ban3 tu2 = expand-open/stretch-plate-picture = expanded territories).

Chemo-therapy patient fears 癌細胞擴散 (ai2 xi4 bao1 kuo4 san4 = cancer-small-cell-expand-disperse = spread of cancer cells). Some countries refuse to join international 核不擴散 (he2 bu4 kuo4 san4 = nuclear-no-expand-disperse = nuclear non-proliferation) treaty.

by Diana Yue