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 political parties

Putonghua pronunciation: jiang3
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung2
Meanings: Chinese surname

蔣 is surname of Generalissimo 蔣介石 Jiang3 Jie4-shi2 = Chiang Kai-shek, 1887-1975), supreme leader of China’s 國民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = state-people-party = Nationalist Party) after 孫中山 (Sun1 Zhong1-shan1 = Sun Yat-sen) died in 1925.

Commandant of 黃埔軍校 (huang2 pu3 jün1 xiao4 = yellow-port-army-school = Whampa Military Academy, founded 1924), 蔣 was 軍事獨裁者 (jün1 shi4 du2 cai2 zhe3 = army-affairs-single-decide-person = military dictator).

Republican China’s 四大家族 (si4 da4 jia1 zu2 = four-big/rich/powerful-family-clans) were 蔣家 (Jiang3 jia1 = Jiang/Chiang-family), 宋家 (Song4 jia3 = Song/Soong-family), 孔家 (Kong3 jia1 = Kong/Kung-family), 陳家 (Chen2 jia1 = Chen-family). 蔣 died in Taiwan, succeeded by son 蔣經國 (Jiang3 Jing1-guo2 = Chiang Ching-kuo, 1910-1988).

by Diana Yue