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 Qin Dynasty

秦

Putonghua pronunciation: qin2
Cantonese pronunciation: chun4
Meanings: Chinese place name, name of Chinese dynasty, Chinese surname

秦 (radical 禾 huo2, rice-crop) is in today’s 甘肅 (Gan1 Su1 = Gansu province), 陝西 (Shan3 Xi1 = Shaanxi province). 秦腔 (Qin2 qiang1 = Qin-singing) = Shaanxi opera.

Under 封建制度 (feng1 jian4 zhi4 du4 = bestow-title-and-land-build-system/institution = feudalism), 諸侯國 (zhu1 hou2 guo2 = noblemen’s-states = dukedoms/earldoms) obeyed/served 周王子 (Zhou1 tian1 zi3 = Zhou’s-heaven’s-son = Zhou Dynasty’s Emperor with Heavenly Mandate). 秦國 (Qin2 guo2 = Qin-state)’s ruler raised title/rank from 公 (gong1, duke) to 王 (wang2, king), 滅六國 (mie4 liu4 guo2 = extinguished/conquered-six-other-states), overthrew Zhou Dynasty, founded 秦朝 (Qin2 chao2 = Qin-Dynasty, 221-207 B.C.)

秦始皇 (Qin2 Shi3 Huang2 = Qin’s-First-Emperor) ruled tyrannically. 避秦 (bi4 Qin2 = avoid-Qin) describes refugees fleeing/ hiding from political turmoil/oppression.

by Diana Yue