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

統 (radical系 xi4, silk/hang) means統領 (tong3 ling3 = unite-lead). 統帥 (tong3 shuai4 = leading-general) = top commander. 統治者 (tong3 zhi4 zhe3 = overall-rule-person) = ruler. Budgets need 統籌 (tong3 chou2 = overall-planning), 統計 (tong3 ji4 = overall-estimates/accounting/statistics).

統一 (tong3 yi1 = lead-one) = uniform/unify/standardize. 統一戰線 (tong3 yi1 zhan4 xian4 = unify-one-war-line) = allies’ unified front. During Chinese Nationalist-Communist civil war (1946-1949), 統戰 (tong3 zhan4 = unify-war) means befriending/persuading/luring political opponents to win them over.

秦 (Qin2) 統一天下 (tong3 yi1 tian1 xia4 = unite-into-one-heaven-under = unified world/China), implemented reforms: 書同文 (shu1 tong2 wen2 = writingsame-script = standardized writing script), 車同轅 (che1 tong2 zhe2 = carts-same-axle = standardized carts’ axle lengths).

by Diana Yue