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

Putonghua pronunciation: chi2
Cantonese pronunciation: chi4
Meanings: gallop, speed, spread, look forward to


奔馳 (ben1 chi2 = run-gallop), meaning gallop, is also “Benz”-transliterated, i.e. Mercedes-Benz’s Chinese brand-name. 為口奔馳 (wei4 kou3 ben1 chi2 = for~mouth/eat-run-gallop) means rushing around, working for livelihood.

秦 (Qin2) unified China, implemented 車同輪 (che1 tong2 zhe2 = carts-same-axle = standardized carts’ axle lengths), built network of 馳道 (chi2 dao4 = chariots/cavalry-highways). Reminiscing on ancient 秦帝國 (Qin2 di4 guo2 = Qin-emperor-state = the Qin Empire) makes tourists 神馳 (shen2 chi2 = spirit-gallop = imagination roams).

by Diana Yue