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

帝
Putonghua pronunciation: di4
Cantonese pronunciation: dai3
Meanings: emperor

Meaning of Chinese terms 皇帝, 帝, 皇帝 evolved gradually. Originally, 皇 (huang2) meant great/beautiful, 帝 (di4) meant people’s lord. Ancient classics mentioned 上帝 (shang4 di4 = high-lord/ruler = supreme-lord/god of the universe) and legends of 三皇五帝 (san1 huang2 wu3 di4 = three-lords-five-lords = eight great tribal leaders).

秦王 (Qin2 wang2 = Qin-state’s-king) defeated other states, unified China in 220 BC, called himself 始皇帝 (shi3 huang2 di4 = beginning-lord-lord = the first emperor). In Chinese history he is 秦始皇 (Qin2 shi3 huang2 = Qin’s-first-supreme-ruler), founder of the Chinese empire.

帝國 (di4 guo2 = emperor-state) = empire, 帝國主義 (di4 guo2 zhu3 yi4 = emperor-state-main-meaning) = imperialism.

Chinese Christians translated God as “上帝”.

by Diana Yue