

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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

Putonghua pronunciation: *di4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *dai3*

Meanings: emperor

Meaning of Chinese terms 皇, 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”.