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

軍
Putonghua pronunciation: jun1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwan1
Meanings: army, military

国防 (guo2 fang2 = state/national-defence) requires 武力 (wu3 li4 = military-strength), 軍隊 (jun1 dui4 = army/troops-team = army).

軍國主義 (jun1 guo2 zhu3 yi4 = army-state-main-meaning = militarism) fuelled WWII. In China, 抗戰軍興 (kang4 zhan4 jun1 xing1 = resist-war-army-rise) = War of Resistance against Japan boosted expansion of army. Many young men 從軍 (cong2 jun1 = followed/joined-army). Chinese 軍方 (jun1 fang1 = army-side = military commanders) launched 軍事行動 (jun1 shi4 xing2 dong4 = army-actions-walk-move = military actions) against invading 日軍 (ri4 jun1 = “Jap”an-transliterated-troops).

In Europe, 盟軍 (meng2 jun1 = allied-forces) fought 德軍 (De2 jun1 = “Deut”sch-transliterated-troops) until they 滅不成軍 (kui4 bu1 cheng2 jun1 = break-no-form-army = were crushed completely).

by Diana Yue