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 political parties

戦
Putonghua pronunciation: zhan4
Cantonese pronunciation: jin3
Meanings: fight, battle, war

戦 (radical 戈 ge1, spear) means war/battle: the two世界大戦 (shi4 jie4 da4 zhan4 = world-territory-big-war = world wars), 戦役 (zhan4 yi4 = fight-military-service = battle). 星球大戦 (xing1 qiu2 da4 zhan4 = star-spheres-big-war) is Chinese title of movie Star Wars.

After血戦 (xue4 zhan4 = bloody-battle), 戦俘 (zhan4 fu2 = war-captives/PoWs) are captured on 戦場 (zhan4 chang3 = battlefield).

Old 戦友 (zhan4 you3 = war-friend = fellow-fighters/comrades) remember China’s 1946-49 内戦 (nei4 zhan4 = internal-war = Civil War). 国民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = state-people-party = Nationalist Party) 戰敗 (zhan4 bai4 = fight-defeat = lost), 共産黨 (gong4 chan2 dang3 = common/share-property-party = Communist Party) 戰勝 (zhan4 sheng4 = fight-victory = won).

by Diana Yue