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 National Day

烈 (radical 火 = fire) = 強烈 (qiang2 lie4 = strong-violent/raging), 剛烈 (gang1 lie4 = strong/unswerving-brave):
烈日 (lie4 ri4 = hot/harsh-sun), 烈風 (lie4 feng1 = violent-wind),
烈火 (lie4 huo3 = powerful-flames), 烈酒 (lie4 jiu3 = strong-liquor), 烈馬 (lie4 ma3 = powerful/untamable-stallion), 烈士 (lie4 shi4 = sacrificed-man/martyr). Tennis is 劇烈運動 (jü2 lie4 yün4 dong4 = dramatic-violent-rotate-move = strenuous sport).

War-epic describes heroes and heroines' 熾烈 (chi4 lie4 = fiery-burning) passion, 熾烈 (re4 lie4 = heated-strong) patriotism, 激烈 (ji1 lie4 = stirred-up-agitated) debates, 轟烈 (hong1 lie4 = blast/deafening-strong = high-key/heroic) resistance.

忠烈祠 (zhong1 lie4 si2 = patriots' martyrs' temple/shrine) houses 革命先烈 (ge2 ming4 xian1 lie4 = change-fate-previous-sacrificed = revolutionary martyrs') remains.

by Diana Yue