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 warlords

軍
Putonghua pronunciation: jün1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwan1
Meanings: army, soldier

軍 has radical 車 (che1, cart/chariot). Youths 當兵 (dang1 bing1 = be-soldier = join army) as 士兵 (shi4 bing1 = man-soldier = pawns/privates), aspire to be 軍官 (jün1 guan1 = army-officers), 將軍 (jiang1 jün1 = lead-army = generals) commanding 軍隊 (jün1 dui4 = army-team = armies), 軍艦 (jün1 jian4 = army-ship = battleships).

Napoleon was brilliant 軍人 (jün1 ren2 = army-person = soldier). 勇冠三軍 (yong3 guan4 san1 = brave-win-three-army) describes ablest/bravest soldier/athlete.

Republican China’s 黃埔軍校 (huang2 pu3 jün1 xiao4 = yellow-port-army-school = Whampoa Military Academy, founded 1924) was modeled on US’ 西點 (xi1 dian3 = West-Point). During Japanese invasion (1931-1945) 國軍 (guo2 jün1 = nation’s-army = Chinese army) fought 日軍 (Ri4 jün1 = Japanese Army).

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