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

Putonghua pronunciation: fa2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: powerful family/person, valve

閥 (radical 門 men2, pictogram showing door-panels) originally meant column carrying eulogies about a distinguished family’s meritorious achievements. In feudal China 門閥 (men2 fa2 = door/house-eulogy-column = powerful families/lineages) dominated politics.

Today 閥 has derogatory meaning. 軍閥 (jūn1 fa2 = army-powerful-persons) = tyrannical warlords. 財閥 (cái2 fa2 = wealth-powerful-persons) = money tycoons. 學閥 (xué2 fa2 = study-powerful-persons) = powerful/dictatorial academics.

辛亥革命 (xīn1 hài4 ge2 ming4 = Xin-Hai-change-fate = Revolution of 1911, the Xinhai year) established 中華民國 (Zhōng1 Huá2 Min2 Guó2 = Middle-China-People’s-State = the Republic of China). 但統一 (tóng3 yī1 = unite-one = unification) was difficult because 軍閥橫行 (jūn1 fa2 hēng2 xíng2 = army-powerful-men-crosswise-walk = warlords went around arrogantly bullying and victimizing people).

by Diana Yue