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 ancient fables

茅
Putonghua pronunciation: mao2
Cantonese pronunciation: maau4
Meanings: spear

茅 (pictogram resembling man carrying long weapon) and 盾 (pictogram resembling board protecting 目 mu4, eyes) are weapons. Warrior thrusts 長矛 (chang2 mao2 = long-spear); opponent holds 盾牌 (dun4 pai2 = shield-board = shield) against 矛頭 (mao2 tou2 = spear-head). Figuratively, 矛頭 (mao2 tou2 = spear-head) means attacks concentration, 後盾 (hou4 dun4 = back-shield) means support/backing.

Fable: Vendor brags his 矛 (mao2, spear) and 盾 (dun4, shield) are both strongest. Query: Which will prove stronger if 以子之矛, 攻子之盾 (yi3 z1 zhi1 mao2, gong1 z1 zhi1 dun4 = with-your-spear, attack-your-shield)? Hence modern term 矛盾 (mao2 dun4 = spear-shield = paradoxical/mutually conflicting, contradiction/problem).

内部矛盾 (nei4 bu4 mao2 dun4 = inside-part-contradiction) means group’s internal problem/dispute/split.

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