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 military parades**

**軍**

Putonghua pronunciation: jun 1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwan 1
Meanings: army

軍隊 (jun1 dui4 = army-team) = army/troops. 海陸空軍 (hai3 lu4 kong1 san1 jun1 = sea-land-sky-three-armies) = navy, army, air-force. 軍人 (jun1 ren2 = army-man) = soldier.

胡錦濤 (Hu2 Jin3-tao1) inspected army at 大閱兵 (da4 yue4 bing1 = big-read-soldiers = big military parade). 將軍 (jiang1 jun1 = lead-army = generals) lead 軍事演習 (jun1 shi4 yan3 xi2 = army-affairs-perform-practice = military exercises).

人民解放軍 (ren2 min2 jie3 fang4 jun1 = person-people-loosen-free-army = People’s Liberation Army, PLA) has 核潛艇 (he2 qian2 ting3 = nuclear-dive/under-water-boat = nuclear submarines), 戰機 (zhan4 ji1 = war/ fighter-planes), will build 航母 (short for 航空母艦, hang2 kong1 mu3 jian4 = sail/fly-sky-mother-warship = aircraft carriers).

by Diana Yue