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

士 (shi 4)
Cantonese pronunciation: si 6
Meanings: man, scholar, soldier

士 means man. However, 女士 (nu3 shi1 = woman-man) is “madam”. 士人 (shi4 ren2 = scholar-person) = scholars; 學士 (xue2 shi4 = study-scholar = bachelor-degree holder), 碩士 (shuo2 shi4 = abundant-scholar = master-degree holder), 博士 (bo2 shi4 = broad/erudite-scholar = PhD-holder).

士官 (shi4 guan1 = 軍官 jun1 guan1 = army-officers) lead 士兵 (shi4 bing1 = man-soldier = infantrymen/privates/lower-rank-soldiers). 勇士 (yong3 shi4 = brave-man) = fierce fighter e.g. Samson. 武士 (wu3 shi4 = military-man) = armed-fighters/knights/samurais. 死士 (si3 shi4 = die-man) are mission-killers prepared to fight to death.

Seeing generals 身先士卒 (shen1 xian1 shi4 zu2 = body-before-soldiers-infantry = going ahead of subordinates in battle) makes 士氣大振 (shi4 qi4 da4 zhen4 = soldiers’ spirit/morale-greatly-boosted).

by Diana Yue