Character Builder

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

**槍**

Putonghua pronunciation: **qiang 1**

Cantonese pronunciation: **cheung 1**

Meanings: spear, gun

Armies have 槍炮 (**qiang1 pao4** = guns-cannons). Policemen 佩槍 (**pei4 qiang1** = wear-guns). Snipers 槍擊 (**qiang1 ji1** = gun-strike = shoot at) targets.

Soldiers advance amidst 槍林彈雨 (**qiang1 lin2 dan4 yu3** = guns-forest-bullets-rain = heavy shooting). Traitors 槍口向內 (**qiang1 kou3 dui4 nei4** = gun-mouth-towards-inside = threaten/attack their own side).

Mao Zedong said “槍杆子裡出政權” (**qiang1 gan1 zi0 li3 chu1 zheng4 quan2** = gun-barrel-diminutive-inside-emerge-rule-power = “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”). Instead of “槍指揮黨” (**qiang1 zhi3 hui1 dang3** = guns-finger-wave-party/CCP = “The gun commands the Party”), now “黨指揮槍” (**dang2 zhi3 hui1 qiang1** = party/CCP-finger-wave-guns = “The Party commands the gun”).

by Diana Yue