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

Putonghua pronunciation: dan 4
Cantonese pronunciation: daan 6
Meanings: shoot, bounce, hullet, cannon-ball, bomb


Nuclear warfare features 彈道導彈 (dan4 dao4 dao3 dan4 = bomb-route-guided-bomb = ballistic missiles) with 核彈頭 (he2 dan4 tou2 = nuclear-bomb-heads = nuclear warheads).

China pursued “兩彈一星” (liang3 dan4 yi1 xing1 = two-bombs-one-star) defense policy, developed 原子彈 (yuan2 zi3 dan4 = original-seed-bomb = atomic bomb), 氫彈 (qing1 dan4 = hydrogen-bomb), 導彈 (dao3 dan4 = guided-bomb = guided missiles), 運載火箭 (yun4 zai4 huo3 jian4 = transport-carry-fire-arrow = carrier rockets), 人造衛星 (ren2 zao4 wei4 xing1 = man-made-guard-star = satellites).

by Diana Yue