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 World War II


軸線 (zhou2 xian4 = axle-line = axis) is 直線 (zhi2 xian4 = straight-line) around which 點 (dian3, points) revolve: the Earth’s 自轉軸 (zi4 zhuo3 yuan3  zhou2 = self-spinning-axis), eyes’ 視軸 (shi4 zhou2 = visual/optical-axis).

Beijing/Paris has 中軸線 (zhong1 zhou2 xian4 = central/media-axis-line = long street cutting through middle of entire city). In WWII Germany, Italy, Japan 結盟 (jie2 meng2 = formed-pact), forming 軸心國 (zhou2 xin1 guo2 = axis-centre-countries = Axis Countries) with Berlin, Rome, Tokyo as 軸心 (zhou2 xin1 = axis-centres/cores).

by Diana Yue