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

陣
Putonghua pronunciation: zhen 1
Cantonese pronunciation: jan 6
Meanings: battle array, battle formation

陣 (containing character 車 che1 = cart/chariot/car) means chariot/infantry battle formations. Armies 上前線 (shang4 qian2 xian4 = go-up-to-forward-line), command 陣地 (zhen4 di4 = formation-land = battlefront position). Generals 佈陣 (bu4 zhen4 = arrange-formation): 方陣 (fang1 zhen4 = square/rectangular formation), 長蛇陣 (chang2 she2 zhen4 = long-snake-formation = single-line formation), discretionarily 變陣 (bian4 zhen4 = change-formation/tactics).

陣營 (zhen4 ying2 = formation-camps) means battle camps/sides. 陣容 強勁 (zhen4 rong2 qiang2 jing4 = formation-appearance-strong-powerful) describes army/company strength or sports/movie team’s all-star cast. Warriors/athletes/executives 上陣 (shang4 zhen4 = go-up-to-formation = face battle/match/challenge), perhaps 敗陣 (bai4 zhen4 = defeated-formation = lose battle/match/deal).

Armistice Day commemorates WWII’s 陣亡將士 (zhen4 wang2 jiang4 shi4 = formation-die-generals-soldiers = soldiers who died in battle).

by Diana Yue