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 \ 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

盟 (盟) Putonghua pronunciation: meng2
Cantonese pronunciation: mang4
Meaning: alliance, pact, league

盟 (日 ri4, sun + 月 yue4, moon + 艹 min3, vessel) means alliance/pact sworn to sun/moon reflected in vessel of water: 盟约 (meng2 yue4 = alliance-agreement/covenant), 背盟 (bei4 meng2 = turn-back-on/betray-alliance). Lovers 海誓山盟 (hai3 shi4 shan1 meng2 = sea-swear-mountain-vow = exchange love vows). Comrades 滴血為盟 (di2 xue3 wei2 meng2 = drip-blood-make-alliance).


WWII's 盟军 (meng2 jun1 = allied-forces) fought 軸心国 (zhou2 xin1 guo2 = Axis Countries). In 联盟 (lian2 meng2 = united-alliance/coalition), 盟主 (meng2 zhu3 = alliance-master = allies' leader) commands 盟友 (meng3 you3 = ally-friends/members).

by Diana Yue