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 Japanese Invasion

日
Putonghua pronunciation: ri4
Cantonese pronunciation: yat6
Meanings: sun, day, Japan

Pictogram 日 (dot inside circle) = 太陽 (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-male-force/yang) = sun. 日出 (ri4 chu1 = sun-out) = sunrise, 日落 (ri4 luo4 = sun-down) = sunset. 日 also means day, 日子 (ri4 zy0 = sun-diminutive) means days.

Japanese myth says sun-god created 日本 (Ri4 Ben3 = sun-origin = Nippon/Nihon/Japan). 天皇 (Tian1 Huang2 = heaven-emperor = Tenno/emperor), 將軍 (jiang1 jyun1 = lead-army = Shogun/general) ruled from 京都 (Jing1 Du1 = capital-city = Kyoto), 東京 (Dong1 Jing1 = east-capital = Tokyo).

Japan studied Chinese culture, developed 茶道 (cha2 dao4 = tea-way/philosophy = teaism), 武士道 (wu3 shi4 dao4 = military-soldier/swordsman-way/philosophy = bushido). Modernization/westernization began with 明治維新 (Ming2 Zhi4 wei2 xin1 = Mei-Ji-maintain-new = Meiji Restoration, 1869-1910+).

by Diana Yue