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

霸
Putonghua pronunciation: ba4
Cantonese pronunciation: ba3
Meaning: seize, dominate, bully, dictatorial, hegemony

霸 (radical 雨 yu3, rain) means seize/dominante. 惡霸 (e4 ba4 = fierce-bully) 彈行霸道 (heng2 xing2 ba4 dao4 = crosswise-walk-bully-way/principle = violate rules/laws). 路霸 (lu4 ba4 = road/street-bully) 霸佔 (ba4 zhan4 = seizes-occupies) pavement. 租霸 (zu1 ba4 = rent-bully) means uncooperative tenant. Famous brand 獨霸 (du2 ba4 = singly-dominates/monopolizes) market.

霸王 (ba4 wang2 = powerful-king/leader) becomes 霸主 (ba4 zhu3 = dictatorial-master = hegemonic overlord). After WWII US and USSR assert 霸權 (ba4 quan2 = hegemonic-power), 為霸 (zheng1 ba4 = compete-for-hegemonic-leadership).

Confucianism praises 王道 (wang2 dao4 = king's-way/principle = benevolent rulership), denounces 霸道 (ba4 dao4 = bully's-way/principle = rule of violence). China asserts 不稱霸 (bu4 cheng1 ba4 = no-claim-hegemony = will not seek hegemony).

by Diana Yue