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 the civil wars

戰 (radical 戈 ge1, spear) means war/battle/fight: 戰士 (zhan4 shi4 = fight-er = warrior/soldier), 戰場 (zhan4 chang3 = battle-field), 戰鬪 (zhan4 dou4 = fight-vie = battle). 二戰 (er4 zhan4 = two/second-war) = Second World War. 竹戰 (zhu1 zhan4 = bamboo-battle) means mahjong game.

內戰 (nei4 zhan4 = inside-war) = civil war. 鴿派 (ge1 pai4 = doves-faction = doves) 主和 (zhu3 he2 = advocate-peace), 鷹派 (ying1 pai4 = eagle-faction = hawks) 主戰 (zhu3 zhan4 = advocate-war). Tolstoy wrote 戰爭與和平 (zhan4 zheng1 yu2 he2 ping2 = war-fight-and-friendship-harmony = War and Peace).

Brilliant strategist 不戰而屈人之兵 (bu4 zhan4 er2 qü1 ren2 zhi1 bing1 = not-fight-and/but-bend-people/other-’s-soldier/army = crushes opponent’s military strength without actually fighting.)

by Diana Yue