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 Boxer Uprising

強
Putonghua pronunciation: qiang2
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung2
Meanings: powerful

強 = strong/powerful: 強烈 (qiang2 lie4 = strong-powerful) blow, 強勁 (qiang2 jing4 = strong-forceful) gale, 強調 (qiang2 diao4 = strong-tone = emphasize), 強迫 (qiang2 po3 = strongly-press/force). 女強人 (nü3 qiang2 ren2 = female-strong-person) = successful career woman.

強盜 (qiang2 dao4 = strong-robber) = bandit. 強姦 (qiang2 jian1 = force-rape) = rape. Robin Hood 鋤強扶弱 (chu2 qiang2 fu2 ruo4 = hoe/eradicate-strong-support-weak = punish oppressors to help oppressed).

Pre-Revolution China 外強中乾 (wai4 qiang2 zhong1 gan1 = outside-strong-inside-dried-up = was weak behind strong appearance), tried 富國強兵 (fu4 guo2 qiang2 bing1 = rich-country-strong-army = boosting national wealth and military strength) to resist 西方列強 (xi1 fang1 lie4 qiang2 = west-direction-row-of-strong = western powers).

by Diana Yue