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 political parties

Putonghua pronunciation: dou4
Cantonese pronunciation: dau36
Meanings: fight, compete, vie with, struggle

Pictogram 鬥 shows two combating men/axes. 鬥士 (dou4 shi4 = fight-man = fighter) needs 鬥志 (dou4 zhi4 = combat-will = zeal/will to fight). Gladiators 角鬥 (jiao3 dou4 = horn/race-fight = wrestle/fight). 鬥牛 (dou4 niu2 = fight-ox) = bull-fight. 決鬥 (jue2 dou4 = determine/final-fight) = duel. Spy/sleuth 鬥智 (dou4 zhi4 = compete-wisdom = uses brains/plots to outsmart/beat opponent).

In 1946-49 Civil War, 國民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = state-people-party = Nationalist Party) and 共產黨 (gong4 chan2 dang3 = common/share-property-party = Communist Party) 惡鬥 (e4 dou4 = bad-fight = fought vehemently).

After 1978, Communist China stopped preaching 階級鬥爭 (jie1 ji2 dou4 zheng1 = tier-class-fight-quarrel = class struggle) because 內鬥 (nei4 dou4 = internal/domestic feuds/antagonism) weakens country’s strength.

by Diana Yue