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 diplomatic relations

盟
Putonghua pronunciation: meng2
Cantonese pronunciation: mang4
Meanings: ally, alliance

Character 盟 (日 ri4, sun + 月 yue4, moon + 皿 min3, vessel) means vow sworn by sun-moon reflected in vessel of water. Sworn brothers 滴血為盟 (di2 xue3 wei2 meng2 = drip-blood-make-vow/alliance). Lovers 海誓山盟 (hai3 shi4 shan1 meng2 = sea-swear-mountain-vow = exchange love vows). Traitor 背盟 (bei4 meng2 = turns-back-on/betrays-alliance).

盟主 (meng2 zhu3 = alliance-master = allies’ leader), 盟友 (meng3 you3 = ally-friend = allies) formulate 盟約 (meng2 yue4 = alliance-agreement/covenant), form 聯盟 (lian2 meng2 = united-alliance/coalition), e.g. WWII’s 盟軍 (meng2 jun1 = allied forces).

不結盟國 (bu4 jie2 meng2 guo2 = no-tie-alliance-country = Non-Aligned Countries) do not join power blocs. 東盟 (dong1 meng2 = east-alliance) = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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