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 new People's Congress

換 漢 Putonghua pronunciation: huan4
Cantonese pronunciation: woon6
Meanings: change, alter, exchange, substitute

換 (radical 手 = shou3, hand) = 更換 (geng1 huan4 = replace-change/exchange): 換衣服 (huan4 yi2 fu2 = change-clothes-dress = change clothes), 換位 (huan4 wei4 = change/exchange-seats/positions), 換車 (huan4 che1 = change/get new car).

Employees work 換取 (huan4 qü3 = change-take = in exchange for) wages.

換人 (huan4 ren2 = change-person) = replace/substitute staff/occupant. 換代 (huan4 dai4 = change-generation) = new generation replaces old. RMB cannot 自由兌換 (zi4 you2 dui4 huan4 = self-allow-match-exchange = isn't freely convertible).

PRC's 18th People's Congress換屆 (huan4 jie4 = change-term = gets new team of officer-bearers), 換班 (huan4 ban1 = change-team) = change shift. 換領導班子 huan4 ling3 dao3 ban1 zi0 = change-lead-guide-team-diminutive = leadership changes hands.

by Diana Yue