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 1949 Liberation

共

Putonghua pronunciation: gong4
Cantonese pronunciation: gung6
Meanings: together, common, share

共 = 共同 (gong4 tong2 = share-same = together/shared): 共事 (gong4 shi4 = together-serve = serve same company/boss), 共享 (gong4 xiang3 = together-enjoy = share joy/benefit), 共識 (gong4 shi1 = common-know/identify = consensus), 共黨 (gong4 dang3 = common-party = communist party). Head-count: 共十人 (gong4 shi2 ren2 = altogether-ten-people).

Lovers vow 生死與共 (sheng1 si3 yu3 gong4 = live-die-with-together = never forsake each other). 不共戴天之仇 (bu4 gong4 dai4 tian1 zhi1 chou2 = cannot-together-bear/live-under-same-sky-such-offence) means unforgivable wrong done to someone by enemy (e.g. killing of parent).

Idealists hope everyone can 共存共榮 (gong4 cun2 gong4 rong2 = together-exist-together-propser = co-exist and thrive side-by-side) in共和國 (gong4 he2 guo2 = together-harmony-state = republic).

by Diana Yue