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

議 (radical 言 yan2, words/speech) = 議論 (yi3 lun4 = discuss-comment), 商議 (shang1 yi3 = talk-about-discuss = discussion), 議會 (yi3 hui4 = discuss-meet) = parliament/congress, 議員 (yi3 yu'an2 = discuss-member) = parliamentarian/congressman. American Congress has 參議院 (can1 yi3 yu'an4 = participate-debate-court = Senate) and 眾議院 (zhong4 yi3 yu'an4 = many-debate-court = House of Representatives).

Many 議題 (yi3 ti2 = discuss-title/topic = topics) are discussed in China's 人大 (ren2 da4 = people-big = National People's Congress) and 政協 (zheng4 xie3 = political-unite-strength = Political Consultative Conference).

Dropping 爭議性 (zheng1 yi3 xing4 = fight-discuss-nature = controversial) issues, opposing factions 議和 (yi3 he2 = discuss-harmony = discuss peace/reconciliation options). Nay-voters get 非議 (fei1 yi3 = condemnatory-remarks).

by Diana Yue