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

Putonghua pronunciation: hong2
Cantonese pronunciation: hung4
Meanings: red, turn red, leftist


紅 symbolizes 社會主義 (she4 hui4 zu3 yi4 = club-society-main-meaning = socialism): 紅軍 (hong2 jün1 = Red-Army), 紅色政權 (hong2 se1 zheng4 qian2 = red-color-political/ruling-power = socialist/communist regime), “紅旗” (hong2 qi2 = Red-Flag magazine, CCP’s party organ).

紅衛兵 (hong2 wei4 bing1 = red-guard-soldiers) = Red Guards. 又紅又專 (you4 hong2 you4 zhu4n1 = also-red-also-specialist) describes Red China’s politically-correct professionals.

by Diana Yue