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 Revolution of 1911

Putonghua pronunciation: ge2
Cantonese pronunciation: gaak3
Meanings: leather, hide, remove, change

革 shows hide skinned from animal. 皮革 (pi2 ge2 = skin-hide) = leather. Verb 革 originally means removing/tanning animal skin to make leather, hence 革 means remove/change. 革职 (ge2 zhi1 = remove-post) = sacked from post. 洗心革面 (xi3 xin1 ge2 mian4 = wash-heart-change-face) describes penitent villain turning over a new leaf.

Japan’s 明治維新 (Ming2 Zhi4 wei2 xin1 = “Meiji”-reign-period-maintain-new = Meiji Restoration, 19th century) triggered social 變革 (bian4 ge2 = transform-change = changes).

20th century China’s 革新派 (ge2 xin1 pai4 = change-new-sect = reformists) opposed 守舊派 (shou3 jiu4 pai4 = guard-old-sect = conservatists), advocated 政治改革 (zheng4 zhi4 gai3 ge2 = political-rule-alter-change = political reforms), 革命 (ge2 ming4 = change-fate = revolution).

by Diana Yue