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

命数
Putonghua pronunciation: ming4
Cantonese pronunciation: ming6
Meanings: life, fate

命数 = 生命 (sheng1 ming4 = alive-life) = life/life-span: 長命 (chang2 ming4 = long-life), 短命 (duan3 ming4 = short-lived).
命数运 (ming4 yün4 = life-cycle/luck) = fate: people are 注定 (zhu4 ding4 = cast-fixed = predestined) to be 好命 (hao3 ming4 = good-fated = fortunate) or 苦命 (ku3 ming4 = bitter-fated = misfortunate). 算命 (suan4 ming4 = calculate-fate = fortune-telling) tries to explain 命理 (ming4 li3 = fate's-patterns = how fate/predestination dominates us).

革命 (ge2 ming4 = change-fate = revolution) literally means overturning nation’s fate. Russia's 十月革命 (shi2 yue4 ge2 ming4 = tenth-month-revolution = October Revolution, 1917) overthrew the Czars' regime. China's 辛亥革命 (xin1 hai4 ge2 ming4 = Xin-Hai-year-Revolution, 1911) overthrew the Qing Dynasty.

by Diana Yue