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 comradeship

同 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) means 同樣 (tong2 yang4 = same/similar-type/condition), 相同 (xiang1 tong2 = mutually-same): 同時 (tong2 shi2 = same-time/simultaneous), 同意 (tong2 yi4 = same-idea/intent = consent), 同情 (tong2 qing2 = same-emotion = sympathy), 不同 (bu4 tong2 = un-like = different). 同學 (tong2 xue2 = same-study) = fellow-students. 同事 (tong2 xin4 = same-work) = colleagues. 同性戀 (tong2 xing4 lian3 = same-sex-love) = homosexuality/lesbianism. 世界大同 (shi4 jie4 da4 tong2 = world-territory-big-same) = world unity/harmony.

同志 (tong2 zhi4 = same-aim = comrades) are 同路人 (tong2 lu4 ren2 = same-road-people = like-minded people/partners), must 求同存異 (qiu2 tong2 cun2 yi4 = seek-agreement-while-maintaining-differences), never 黨同伐異 (dang3 tong2 fa3 yi4 = gang-up-with-like-minded-buddies-and-attack-dissenters).

by Diana Yue