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 political parties

同 (tong2)
Cantonese pronunciation: tung4
Meanings: converge, share, together, same

同 = 共同 (gong4 tong2 = share-same = similarly/sharing). 同時 (tong2 shi2 = same-time) = simultaneous. 同樣 (tong2 yang4 = same-appearance) = similar-looking/equally. 同情心 (tong2 qing2 xin1 = share-feeling-heart) = sympathy.

同學 (tong2 xue2 = together-study) = classmate. 同事 (tong2 shi4 = share-matters/work) = colleague. 同袍 (tong2 pao2 = same-robe/uniform) = fellow-soldier/policeman. 同胞 (tong2 bao1 = same-cell) = compatriot. 同黨 (tong2 dang3 = same-gang) = accomplice. 同志 (tong2 zhi4 = same-aspiration) means comrades or 同性戀者 (tong2 xing4 xian3 zhe3 = same-sex-love-person = homosexual/lesbian).

同舟共濟 (tong2 zhou1 gong4 ji4 = same-boat-together-aid) describes distressed people helping each other. Idealists preach 世界大同 (shi4 jie4 da4 tong2 = world-territory-big-same = universal equality).

by Diana Yue