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 PRC's 60th year

改 Putonghua pronunciation: gai 3
Cantonese pronunciation: goi 2
Meanings: alter, change

改 = 改動 (gai dong 34 = alter-move/change). Seamstresses 改衣 (gai yi 31 = do alterations). Developers 改建 (gai jian 34 = change-build = re-build) old premises, 改善 (gai shan 34 = change-good/better = improve) facilities. Car-makers 改裝 (gai zhuang 31 = change-furnish = re-model/convert) sedans into race-cars. Fickle witnesses/partners 改口 (gai kou 23 = change-mouth = change testimony/promises).


改頭換面 (gai tou huan mian 3244 = change-head-replace-face) describes individuals changing look/identity, organizations changing structure. 改朝換代 (gai chao huan dai 3244 = change-reign-replace-generation) is regime change.

by Diana Yue