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

革 (symmetrical shape of skinned animal hide)
Putonghua pronunciation: ge 2
Cantonese pronunciation: gaak 3
Meanings: animal hide, remove, expel, change, revolutionize

革 means removing 皮革 (pi ge 22 = skin-hide). 革職 (ge zhi 22 = remove-post) = dismissal. Institutions evolve through 沿革 (yuan ge 22 = trail/inherit-remove = developments), 改良 (gai liang 32 = alter-good/better = improvements), 革新 (ge xin 21 = remove-make-new = reforms).

改革派 (gai ge pai 324 = change-reforme-faction = reformists) opposed 保守派 (bao shou pai 234 = retain-defend-faction/attitude = conservatives) in Europe’s 宗教改革 (zong jiao gai ge 1432 = head-religion-change-remove = religious reformation), China’s 土地改革 (tu di gai ge 3432 = earth-land-change-remove = land reform).

文革 (wen ge 22, short for 文化大革命 wen hua da ge ming 24424 = writing-teach/transform-big-change-fate/life = Cultural Revolution) smashed institutions.

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