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 rice-planting

耕
Putonghua pronunciation: geng1
Cantonese pronunciation: gaang1
Meanings: till

Character 耕 = 禾 (lei3, plough) + 井 (jing3, water-well): 耕田 (geng1 tian2 = plough-field = 耕作 geng1 zuo2 = plough-act/work = cultivate/farm land), 春耕 (chun1 geng1 = springtime-ploughing). 漁樵耕讀 (yu2 qiao2 geng1 du2 = fishing/lumbering-farming-reading/being-scholar) are traditional professions.

農夫 (nong2 fu1 = farm-husband = farmer/plowman) cultivates 耕地 (geng1 di4 = plough-land = fields), 掘土 (jue2 tu3 = dig/till-soil) using 犁 (li2, plough), 锄 (ba4, harrow), 鉬 (chu2, hoe).

耕耘 (geng1 yun2 = ploughing-weeding = labor) brings 收穫 (shou1 huo4 = collect-harvest = reward). Steadfast workers 默默耕耘 (mo4 mo4 geng1 yun2 = silent-silent-ploughing-weeding) without show/fuss/boasting. Farmers 退耕還林 (tui4 geng1 huan2 lin2 = retreat-plough/farm-return/restore-forest = give up farming), heeding government’s afforestation policy.

by Diana Yue