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

Putonghua pronunciation: zhong4
Cantonese pronunciation: jung3
Meanings: plant

Verb 種 = planting 種子 (zhong3 zi0 = seed-diminutive = seeds): 种稻 (zhong4 dao4 = plant-grain/rice-crops), 種菜 (zhong4 cai4 = plant-vegetables), 種花 (zhong4 hua1 = plant/cultivate flowers).

種水稻 (zhong4 shui3 dao4 = cultivating-wet-rice-crops) is labor-intensive: 翻土 (fan1 tu3 = turn/till-soil), 育苗 (yü4 miao2 = breed/nurture-young-shoots), 插秧 (cha1 yang1 = insert-young-shoots = plant young shoots in field), 除草除蟲 (chu2 cao3 chu2 chong2 = eliminate-weeds-eliminate- worms/pests), 施肥 (shi1 fei2 = apply-fertilizers), 灌排水 (guan4 pai2 shui3 = pour-drain-water = flood, drain field).

Intensive farming requires 深耕密植 (shen1 geng1 mi4 zhi2 = deep-ploughing/tiling-close-planting). 杂交水稻 (za2 jiao1 shui3 dao4 = mixed-crossbreed-wet-rice = hybrid rice) greatly increased 收成 (shou1 cheng2 = collect-result/success = harvest).

by Diana Yue