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

苗  Putonghua pronunciation: miao2
Cantonese pronunciation: miu4
Meanings: seedling, young shoot

Character 苗 = 草 (cao3, grass) + 田 (tian2, field): 草苗 (cao3 miao2 = grass’s-young-shoot), 樹苗 (shu4 miao2 = tree’s-sapling), 秧苗 (yang1 miao2 = rice-seedling-young-shoot). 幼苗 (you4 miao2 = young-shoots) are bred in 苗圃 (miao2 pu3 = seedling-plant-bed), 溫室 (wen1 shi4 = warm-room = greenhouse). Hong Kong has 護苗基金 (hu3 miao2 ji1 ji1n1 = protect-seedlings-foundation-gold/money = End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation).

Chinese peasants celebrate 穀苗節 (he2 miao2 jie2 = grain-crops-seedlings-festival) in July. 跳秧歌 (tiao4 yang1 ge1 = dance-grain-crop-young-shoots-song) in western China is colorful percussion-accompanied peasant song-dance.

有苗頭 (you3 miao2 tou2 = has-seedlings-head) describes promising person/project. Idiom 拔苗助長 (ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3 = pull-seedlings-help-grow-up) describes over-eager/radical help that kills project.

by Diana Yue