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 job-hunting

薪 (radical 萬 = 草 cao3, grass) originally means firewood. 薪火相传 (xin1 huo3 xiang4 chuan2 = firewood-fire-mutual-pass-on) describes passing on burning torches, i.e., keeping tradition/culture alive from generation to generation.

薪 now means wages/salary: 薪酬 (xin1 chou2 = salary-reward), 薪金 (xin1 jin1 = salary-gold/money), 薪水 (xin1 shui3 = salary-water) all mean salary/pay. 杯水车薪 (bei1 shui3 che1 xin1 = cup-of-water-cartload-of-firewood) means too little water for quenching a big fire, i.e. inadequate means/budget. 薪俸税 (xin1 feng4 shui4 = pay-salary-tax) = income tax.

Graduate seeks 高薪 (gao1 xin1 = high-pay) job, e.g. 月薪 (yue4 xin1 = monthly-salary) $100,000, eventually takes 低薪 (di1 xin1 = low-pay) job because it doesn't 欠薪 (qian4 xin1 = owe-salary = delay pay).

by Diana Yue