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 Jesus’ crucifixion

**荆**

Putonghua pronunciation: **jing1**
Cantonese pronunciation: **ging1**
Meanings: thistle, bramble, thorns

荆 (** = 草 cao3, grass + 刑 xing2, torture) + 棘 (double 棘 ci4, prickle) = 荆棘 (jing1 ji2 = thistles-brambles) having 刺 (ci4, prickles/thorns) on branches/leaves. 洋紫荆 (yang2 zi3 jing1 = foreign-purple-thistle = bauhinia) is Hong Kong’s 市花 (shi4 hua1 = city’s-floral-emblem).

棘手 (** = prick-hands) describes thorny issue/problem. 披荆斩棘 (pi1 jing1 zhan3 ji2 = split-thistles-chop-brambles) = clearing/conquering obstacles. General who committed error 负荆请罪 (fu4 jing1 qing3 zui4 = carry-thistle-branch-beg-blame), i.e. begged to be punished/lashed with 荆条 (jing1 tiao2 = thorny/prickly-branch/whip).

荆棘满途 (jing1 ji2 man3 tu2 = thistles-brambles-fill-path) describes difficult venture. Jesus, nailed on the cross, wore 荆棘冕 (jing1 ji2 mian3 = thistles-brambles-coronet = crown of thorns).

by Diana Yue