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 beggars

缺 (radical缶 fou3, pot, suggesting chipped utensil) means缺乏(qüe1 fa2 = miss-lack = insufficiency). Deserts缺水(qüe1 shui3 = lack-water), 鱼 (qüe1 yü2 = have-no-fish). 缺少(qüe1 shao3 = miss-lack) means short of. 馊(qüe1 dian4 = shortage-of-electricity) causes blackout.

Gamblers缺钱(qüe1 qian2 = are-short-of-money/cash).
Mahjong/bridge game cannot start if三缺一(san1 qüe1 yil = three-lack-one = three players available, one short). 缺德(qüe1 de2 = lack-morality/virtue) describes immoral behavior/people or irresponsible sarcasms.

Poet laments月圆月缺(yüe4 yün2 yüe4 qüe1 = moon-round-moon-incomplete = moon’s wax and wane = time’s passing and ups-and-downs in life/fortune). Beggars just want衣食无缺(yi1 shi2 wu2 qüe1 = clothes-food-no-lack = enough clothes, enough food).

by Diana Yue