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 spring cleaning

積
Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: jik1
Meanings: accumulate, save up, hoard

積 (radical 禾 huo2, grain-crop) = 累積 (lei4 ji1 = plenty-accumulate = pile up). 積水 (ji1 shui3 = accumulated/undrained-water), 積雪 (ji1 xue = piled-up-snow). 積糧 (ji1 liang2 = saving-up-grain/staples/food).

Un-swept corners 積塵 (ji1 chen2 = accumulate-dust). Un-read documents 積壓 (ji1 ya4 = accumulate-press = pile up). Enemies 積怨 (ji1 yuan4 = accumulate-grudge = bear many grudges against each other). Oppressed people have 積憤 (ji1 fen4 = pent-up-anger).

Sage’s New Year advice: Act 積極 (ji1 ji2 = accumulate-ultimate = positive), but don’t 積勞成疾 (ji1 lao2 cheng2 ji2 = accumulate-labor-become-illness = work too hard, break down). Keep 積蓄 (ji1 xu4 = accumulate-store = savings). Whenever possible, 積德 (ji1 de2 = accumulate-virtue/good-karma = be kind, do good works).

by Diana Yue