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

赤
Putonghua pronunciation: chi4
Cantonese pronunciation: chek3
Meanings: red, bare, pure, intense, exposed, uncovered

赤 (土 tu3, earth on 火 huo3, fire) means red/hot/pure/intense/bare: 赤色 (chi4 se1 = red-color), 赤红 (chi4 hong2 = intense/dazzling-red), 赤字 (chi4 zì4 = red-words/figures = recorded deficit), 赤化 (chi4 hua4 = red-transformation) means Communist occupation/influence on region/thinking. 赤道 (chi4 dao4 = red-path) = Equator.

Tai-jī master 赤手空拳 (chi4 shou3 kong1 qüan2 = bare-handed-empty-fisted = with bare hands) captures gun-man. Nudists show 赤子之心 (chi4 zì3 zhi1 xin1 = pure-child-'s-heart = innocence), go 赤條條 (chi4 tiao2 tiao2 = bare-body-body = naked).


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