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

Putonghua pronunciation: fei4
Cantonese pronunciation: fai3
Meanings: dispose, depose, neglect, maim, disable, waste, ruin, abandon, abolish, useless


廢氣 (fei4 qi4 = waste-gas) = cars’ exhaust. Re-cycling 廢水 (fei4 shui3 = waster-water = effluent), 廢鐵 (fei4 tie3 = water-iron = scrap iron) is 廢物利用 (fei4 wu4 li4 yong4 = abandoned-things-advantageously-use). 因噎廢食 (yin1 ye1 fei4 shi2 = because-once-choked-stop-eating) is stupid logic.

Beggar: “I’m 殘廢 (can2 fei4 = maimed/disabled), 廢人 (fei4 ren2 = useless-person),” Sage: “廢話! (fei4 hua4 = nonsense-talk!” Stop being 頑廢 (tui2 fei4 = dispirited-inactive = defeatist/decadent!)

by Diana Yue