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 zis 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

浪

Putonghua pronunciation: lang4
Cantonese pronunciation: long6
Meanings: wave, wander, unrestrained, rambling, homeless


Knight-errant 浪跡天涯 (lang4 ji1 tian1 ya2 = wander-track-sky's-edge = drifts all over the world), 浪子回头 (lang4 zi4 hui2 tou2 = wandering-son-turns-back-head) describes undisciplined/delinquent person reforming himself. 浪得虚名 (lang4 de2 xu1 ming2 = undeservedly-acquire-empty-name) describes famous people/brands lacking substance.

浪人 (lang4 ren2, Japanese kanji pronounced “ronin”, i.e. roaming-person) means unemployed/homeless samurai. Beggars are usually 流浪漢 (liu2 lang4 han4 = flow-wave-men = homeless drifters/tramps).

by Diana Yue