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 ù 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 removing obstacles

Putonghua pronunciation: chan3
Cantonese pronunciation: chaan2
Meaning: spade, shovel, scrape, spatula

鐮 (radical 金 jin1, metal/gold) = 鐮子 (chan3 zi0 = spade/shovel-diminutive = spade/shovel): 鐮銋 (tie3 chan3 = iron-shovel), 一鏮 (yi1 chan3 = one-spadeful), 煤鏮 (mei2 chan3 = coal-shovel).
鏮土機 (chan3 tu3 ji1 = spade/scrape-earth-machine = earth scraper) 鏮泥 (chan3 ni2 = scrapes-up-mud), 鏮沙 (chan3 sha1 = scrapes-up-sand), 鏮走 (chan3 zou3 = shovel-run/off/away = removes) debris.

Cantonese expression 擊鏮鏮 (zha1 huo4 chan2 = Cantonese ja1 wok6 chaan2 = hold/wield-pan/wok-spatula) means “work as a cook”. Chef demonstrates stir-fry with spatula: 鏮鬆 (chan3 song1 = scrapes-loose/apart) diced morsels, 鏮起 (chan3 qi3 = shovel-ups) on to plate.

Dictator 鏮除 (chan3 chu2 = shovel-remove = eliminates) enemies. Rebellion gets 鏮平 (chan3 ping2 = shovel-level/flat = leveled/razed to the ground).

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