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 working

Putonghua pronunciation: xin1
Cantonese pronunciation: san1
Meanings: spicy hot, bitter, pungent, laborious, suffering

Pictogram 辛 (resembling thorns/brambles) describes 辛香料 (xin1 xiang1 liao4 = hot-fragrant-materials)’s spicy taste. Curry 味辛 (wei4 xin1 = tastes-hot). Bile-juice 味苦 (wei4 ku3 = tastes-bitter). 辛苦 (xin1 ku3 = spicy-hot-bitter) means toil: 辛勤 (xin1 qin2 = toil-diligently), 辛勞 (xin1 lao2 = toil-labor).

辛辣 (xin1 la4 = spicy-hot) describes satirist’s sharp/scathing/unsparing remarks. After 辛酸 (xin1 suan1 = spicy-hot-sour = pain/suffering) and 千辛萬苦 (qian1 xin1 wan4 ku3 = thousand-spicy-hot-ten-thousand-bitter = countless hardships), trial/pilgrimage ends.

Poet writes: 誰知盤中餐, 粒粒皆辛苦 (shei2 zhi1 pan2 zhong1 can1, li1 li1 jie1 xin1 ku3 = who knows-bowl-inside-meal, grain-grain-all-hot-bitter = Who appreciates the rice in the bowl? Every grain comes from hard toil): Be thankful, treasure food.

by Diana Yue