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

乞 (qi3)
Cantonese pronunciation: hat1
Meanings: beg, implore, plead, supplicate, pauper, mendicant

乞 (radical 乙 yi3, second) = 行乞 (xing2 qi1 = practice-begging).
乞丐 (qi1 gai4 = beg-beggar) aka 叫化 (jiao4 hua4 = call-to-obtain-alms) because Taoist/Buddhist mendicants say 化缘 (hua4 yuan2 = transform/obtain-from-lucky-fate = receive whatever fate brings) for alms-begging.

Besieged country 乞援 (qi1 yuan2 = beg-for-help) from ally. On 七夕 (qi1 xie1 = seventh-evening of seventh lunar month), i.e., Chinese 乞巧節 (qi1 jiao3 jie2 = beg-for-talent/skills-festival), Chinese girls/women offer fruits/prayers to goddess Seventh Sister, pray for talent in sewing/embroidery.

丐幫 (gai4 bang1 = beggars-gang) is traditional underground organization of beggars. Beggars 乞食 (qi1 shi2 = beg-for-food), 乞錢 (qi1 qian2 = beg-for-money), but don抰 搖尾乞憐 (yao2 wei3 qi1 lian2 = wag-tail-beg-for-pity = do antics to win favor/pity).

by Diana Yue