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 migrant workers

窮 Putonghua pronunciation: qiong2
Cantonese pronunciation: kung4
Meanings: poor, poverty, dead-end

窮 = 貧 (pin2) = poor/poverty. 貧民窟 (pin2 min2 ku1 = poor-people's-caves) = slums. 窮巷 (qiong2 xiang4 = dead-end-alley) = cul-de-sac. 窮省 (qiong2 sheng3 = poor-provinces) need state’s 救濟 (jiu4 ji4 = save-irrigate = material/financial aid).

In Hongkong 窮人 (qiong2 ren2 = poor-people) claim 綜援 (zong1 yuan2 = Comprehensive Social Security Assistance). Many 失業者 (shi1 ye4 zhe3 = lost-employment-persons = unemployed people) 人窮志不窮 (ren2 qiong2 zhi4 bu4 qiong2 = person-poor-courage-not-poor = materially-deprived but keeping up courage/spirit).

To eliminate 貧富懸殊 (pin2 fu4 xuan2 shu1 = poor-rich-hang/stretch-difference = big gap between rich and poor), 創富 (chuang4 fu4 = creating-wealth) is better than 均貧 (jun1 pin2 = equal/average-poor = evenly sharing/spreading burden of poverty).

by Diana Yue