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 zì 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

積

Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: jik1
Meanings: accumulate, hoard

積 (radical 禾 he, grain-stalk) = 積累 (ji1 lei4 = accumulate-continuously): 積雪 (ji1 xue3 = piled-up-snow) on peaks, 積水 (ji1 shui3 = trapped-water) in gutters. Enemies have 積怨 (ji1 yuan4 = long-time-animosity). Oppressed people have 積憤 (ji1 fen4 = accumulated-anger).

Migrants earn 血汗錢 (xue4 han4 qian2 = blood-sweat-money = money earned by sweat and toil), send 積蓄 (ji1 xu4 = accumulate-keep = savings) home to 養家 (yang3 jia1 = feed/support-family). Unethical employers 積壓工資 (ji1 ya1 gong1 zhi1 = accumulate-press/hold-work-money = hold back workers’ wages).

處心積慮 (chu4 xin1 ji1 lü4 = deliberate-mind-continuous-calculation) describes determined/careful planning for later action. 積穀防饑 (ji1 gu3 fang2 ji1 = accumulate-grains-anticipate-famine) means saving up for a rainy day.

by Diana Yue