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 the Third World

Putonghua pronunciation: pin 2
Cantonese pronunciation: pan 4
Meanings: poverty-stricken, lack

貧 = 货窮 (pin qiong 22 = poor-exhaust = poor). Third World countries are 发展中國家 (fa zhan zhong guo jia 13121 = develop-stretch--ing-country-home = developing countries). Some are 窮國 (qiong guo 22 = poor-countries) with 貧乏 (pin fa 22 = poor-lacking = inadequate) resources.

貧富不均 (pin fu bu jun 2421 = poor-rich-not-even = uneven distribution of wealth) creates social problems, but 均贫 (jun pin 12 = even-poor = flat poverty for everyone) is no solution.

貧血 (pin xue 24 = inadequate-blood) = anaemic/anaemia. 貧困 (pin kun 24 = poverty-confined) people/societies are pitiable, but 長貧難顧 (chang pin nan gu 2224 = long-poverty-difficult-to-care-for = it is difficult/unrealistic to forever support/aid those perpetually in need).

by Diana Yue