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 flowers

採 (radical 手 = shou2, hand/arm) = 採摘 (cai3 zhai1 = pick-remove). Plantation laborers 採茶 (cai3 cha2 = pick/pluck-tea-leaves from tea-shrubs). Herbalists 採藥 (cai3 yao4 = pick-medicine = search natural vegetation to collect medicinal herbs). Musicians 採風 (cai3 feng1 = pick-wind/poetry = travel around collecting folk-tunes).

Investigator 採集 (cai3 ji2 = pick-collect) evidence, 採訪 (cai2 fang3 = collect-visit = interview) eye-witnesses. 採耳 (cai3 er3 = pick-ear) = remove ear-wax with ear-scaper.

採花 (cai3 hua1 = pick-flowers) = pick/gather flowers. Poets eulogize 採菊 (cai3 jü2 = picking-chrysanthemums). Girls sing 採蓮謠 (cai3 lian2 yao2 = pick-lotus-song) while picking blooms on lotus-ponds. However, 採花賊 (cai3 hua1 zei2 = pick-flower-thief) means man who steals into households to rape/de-flower women.

by Diana Yue