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 kindergartens

苗
Putonghua pronunciation: miao2
Cantonese pronunciation: miu4
Meaning: seedling, plant’s young shoot, animal’s young

苗 (艹 cao3, grass + 田 tian2, farmed field) = 幼苗 (you4 miao2 = young-young-shoot = plant/animal’s young): paddy-farmer’s 秧苗 (yang1 miao2 = young-shoot), fish-breeder’s 魚苗 (yú2 miao2 = fish-young = young fish), 苗圃 (miao2 pu3 = young-shoots-garden/nursery) grows 樹苗 (shu4 miao2 = trees’-young-shoots), 苗裔 (miao2 yi4 = young-shoot-descendent) = clan’s offsprings.

火苗 (huo3 miao2 = fire-young-shoot) = flames. 疫苗 (yi4 miao2 = epidemic-young-shoot) = vaccine. 苗條 (miao2 tiao2 = young-shoot’s-stem) describes girl’s slim/willowy figure. 有苗頭 (you3 miao2 tou2 = has/shows-seedling-head) means showing early promising sign.

Kindergartens’ task is 育苗 (yū4 miao2 = breed-young-shoots = educating/cultivating) children, not 拔苗助長 (ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3 = pull-seedlings-help-grow = boosting children’s premature development).

by Diana Yue