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 underclass

Putonghua pronunciation: yi3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngai5
Meanings: ant

螞 (radical 虫 chong2, insect/worm) = 螞 (ma3 yi3 = ant); 蠾后 (yi3 hou4 = queen-ant), 雄蟻 (xiong2 yi3 = male-ants = drones), 工蟻 (gong1 yi3 = worker-ants), 蟻丘 (yi3 qiu1 = ant-hill), 白蟻 (bai2 yi3 = white-ants/termites).

螞民 (yi3 min2 = ant-people) means the masses, pitilessly squeezed/debased/crushed. But 螞螞搬泰山 (ma3 yi3 ban1 tai4 shan1 = ants-move-Tai-Mountain) describes humble sectors courageously performing stunning projects.

Today in big Chinese cities 螞族 (yi3 zu2 = ants-tribe) means low-income/unemployed college graduates living in suburban slums like 螞群 (yi3 qun2 = ant-group = ant colonies). Indeed, 蠞螞尚且偷生 (lou2 yi3 shang4 che3 tou1 sheng1 = mole-crickets-ants-still-also-stealthily-live = even the lowliest creatures try hard to stay alive)!

by Diana Yue