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 king planning revenge

Putonghua pronunciation: chang2
Cantonese pronunciation: seung4
Meanings: taste, try

嘗 = taste food. Gourmets 嘗新 (chang2 xin1 = taste-new = try new dishes). Chinese myth says 神農嘗百草 (Shen2 Nong2 chang2 bai2 cao3 = Divine-Farmer-tasted-hundred-grasses = God of Agriculture/Medicine tasted many herbs to test/ascertain their nutritious/healing effects).

嘗試 (chang2 shi4 = taste-try) = attempt. 嘗過甜酸苦辣 (chang2 guo4 tian2 suan1 ku3 la4 = tast-ed-sweet-sour-bitter-hot) = has gone through failures/successes/everything.

嘗 also means “has”. Double-negative 未嘗不可 (wei4 chang2 bu4 ke3 = not-yet-has-no-can) describes “not entirely negative/dismissible” evaluations/plans.

Wu invaded Yüe. Yüe Kingdom’s ruler 厲嘗敗績 (lü3 chang2 bai4 ji1 = repeatedly-tasted-defeat-record = suffered series of defeats), was taken hostage, 嘗盡苦頭 (chang2 jin4 ku3 tou2 = tasted-exhausted-bitter-head = went through countless hardships/humiliations).

by Diana Yue