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 wheat-planting

麦

Putonghua pronunciation: mao4
Cantonese pronunciation: mak6
Meanings: wheat

麦 includes 小麦 (xiao3 mai4 = little-wheat = 麦子 mai4 zio = wheat-diminutive = wheat), 大麥 (da4 mai4 = big-wheat = barley), 黑麥 (hei1 mai4 = black-wheat = rye). 《麥田捕手》(mai4 tian2 bu4 shou3 = rye-field-catch-hand) is Chinese name of Salinger’s novel Catcher in the Rye.

麪粉 (mian4 fen3 = wheat-powder = wheat-flour) makes dough for 麵頭 (man4 tou2 = bun-head = hemispherical buns), 餃子 (jiao3 zio = boiled/shallow-fried crescent-shaped dumplings).

麥麸 (mai4 fu1 = wheat-bran), 大麥茶 (da4 mai4 cha2 = big-wheat/barley-tea = roasted barley tea) are health foods.

啤酒節 (pi2 jiu3 jie2 = beer/wine/alcohol-festival = October Fest) celebrates wheat harvest. 麦穗 (mai4 sui4 = wheat-ear) is symbol of plenty.

by Diana Yue