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

土

Putonghua pronunciation: tu3
Cantonese pronunciation: to3
Meanings: earth, soil, land


土 = earth/soil: 肥土 (fei2 tu3 = fat/rich-soil), 土牆 (tu3 qiang2 = mud-wall). Seeds germinate in 泥土 (ni2 tu3 = soil-earth). Northwestern China’s 黃土高原 (huang2 tu3 gao1 yuan2 = yellow-soil-high-plain = loess plateau) has serious 土壤侵蝕 (tu3 rang3 qin1 shi2 = soil-earth-invade-corrode = soil erosion). Dead things return to 塵土 (chen2 tu3 = dust-soil/earth).

Japan covets China’s 稀土 (xi1 tu3 = rare-earth). 寸金尺土 (cun4 jin1 chi3 tu3 = inch-gold-foot-land) describes exorbitantly-priced apartments.

by Diana Yue