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 short lives

薄 (radical 草 = 草 cao3, grass) means thin/slim/flimsy. 薄片 (bao2 pian4 = thin-piece/slice), 薄饼 (bo2 bing3 = thin-cake/wrap/bliny), 薄膜 (bo2 mo2 = thin-film), 薄礼 (bo2 li3 = modest-present). 薄命 (bo2 ming4 = thin-life/fate) describes really unfortunate people.

Small business 財力薄弱 (cai2 li4 bao2 ruo4 = wealth-power-thin-weak = has small budget), earns 薄利 (bo2 li4 = meagre-profits). 刻薄 (ke1 bao2 = strict-unkind = mean) employer 薄待 (bao2 dai4 = cold-treat = poorly treats) employees.

Some people 薄有才華 (bao2 you3 cai2 hua2 = thin-possess-talent-radiance = are quite talented) but earn 微薄 (wei1 bao2 = small-meager) income. Heaven 厚此薄彼 (hou4 ci3 bo2 bi3 = thick-this-thin-that = blesses one, neglects another = is unfair)!

by Diana Yue