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 migrant workers

護
Putonghua pronunciation: hu4
Cantonese pronunciation: woo6
Meanings: protect

護 = 保護 (bao3 hu4 = conserve-protect), 護士 (hu4 shi4 = protect-person = nurse), 護衛 (hu4 wei4 = protect-guard = guard), 護短 (hu4 duan3 = protect-short = unfairly protecting/defending wrongdoers/poorly-justified causes), 護法 (hu4 fa3 = protect-law/tenets = senior clerics upholding religious creeds). 護苗 (hu4 miao2 = protect-young-shoots = protecting young children) is the goal of Hong Kong’s End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) protects 濒危物種 (pin2 wei1 wu4 zhong3 = nearing-edge-danger-things-species = endangered species). Tigers, killed for 虎骨 (hu2 gu3 = tiger’s-bones), 虎爪 (hu2 zhao3 = tiger’s-paw), 虎鞭 (hu3 bian1 = tiger’s-whip = tiger’s penis), are 受保護動物 (shou4 bao3 hu4 dong4 wu4 = receive-conserve-protect-moving-thing = protected animals).

by Diana Yue