

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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



Putonghua pronunciation: *gong1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *gung1*

Meanings: work, worker, workmanship, refined

Before New Year 工廠 (*gong1 chang3* = work~factories), 工地 (*gong1 di4* = work~land = construction sites) 趕工 (*gan3 gong1* = chase~work = rush to meet deadlines), fear 工人 (*gong1 ren2* = work~ers) 怠工 (*dai4 gong1* = lazy~work = go slow).

China's “農民工” (*nong2 min2 gong1*, shortened to “民工”, = farm~people~worker) are peasants turned workers living as 外來工 (*wai4 lai2 gong1* = outside~come/migrant~workers) in richer regions. 民工潮 (*min2 gong1 chao2* = peasant-people-workers~tide/surge) means massive flow/movement of such migrants. 打工仔 (*da3 gong1 zai3* = hit/do~job~sons = blue/white-collar workers) sigh: “工字不出頭!” (*gong1 zi4 bu4 chu1 tou2* = “工”~character~does-not~protrude~head): “Working as wage/salary-earners, we’ll never rise above ourselves!”