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 working

作 (作 = 人 ren2, person + 乍 zha4, sudden) = arise/make/create: 作用 (zuo4 yong4 = function~effect), 作风 (zuo4 feng1 = person’s behavioral~style). 雷電大作 (lei2 dian4 da4 zuo4 = thunder~electricity-big-arise) = thunder and lightning suddenly/fiercely strike. Monsters 作怪 (zuo4 guai4 = cause~disturbances). Warmongers 作孽 (zuo4 nie4 = commit~evil-deeds).

工作 (gong1 zuo4 = work~do) = work. 作家 (zuo4 jia1 = compose~master = writer/author) produces 作品 (zuo4 pin3 = work~composition/opus). 性工作者 (xing4 gong1 zuo4 zhe3 = sex~work~do~people) = sex-workers.

Farmers 日出而作, 日入而息 (ri4 chu1 er2 zuo4, ri4 ru4 er2 xi1 = sun-out-and~work, sun-in-and~rest = follow daylight hours). Pub-goers 飲酒作樂 (yin3 jiu3 zuo4 le4 = drink~wine/liquore~make~merry).

by Diana Yue