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

幹 (radical 干 gan1, pole/spear) means do/work: 幹活 (gan4 huo2 = do-work-for-livelihood), 幹事 (gan4 shi4 = do/execute-tasks), 幹部 (gan4 bu4 = work-member) = executive/cadre/ganbu. 能幹 (neng2 gan4 = can-do/work) = able/competent. 硬幹 (ying4 gan4 = stiff-do) = pursue something obstinately/inflexibly.

Antagonists 對著幹 (dui4 zhe0 gan4 = face-ing-do) = challenge/obstruct each other. Employee 日幹夜幹 (ri4 gan4 ye4 gan4 = day-work-night-work = works non-stop), finally 不幹了 (bu4 gan4 le0 = no-work--ed = quits). 幹嘛 (gan4 ma2 = do-interrogative) = What’s up/Why?

幹那回事 (gan4 nei4 hui2 shi4 = do-that-round-of-thing) means sex-act. 幹了她 (gan4 le0 ta1 = do-done-her) = fucked her. However, “幹掉她!” (gan4 diao4 ta1 = do-away/finish-her) means “Kill her!”

by Diana Yue