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 promotion

勤
Putonghua pronunciation: qin2
Cantonese pronunciation: kan4
Meanings: attendance, diligent, frequently

勤 (radical 力 li4, strength) = 勤勞 (qin2 lao2 = diligently-labor/toil). Bees 勤採蜜 (qin2 cai3 mi4 = diligently-pick-flowers-for-honey). Lazy-bone 四體不勤 (si4 ti3 bu4 qin2 = four-bodies/limbs-no-diligent = doesn’t move body at all). Housewife 勤儉持家 (qin2 jian4 chi2 jia1 = diligently-frugally-manages-household).

A-student 勤奮讀書 (qin2 fen4 du2 shu1 = diligently-keenly-reads/studies-books). Employee值勤 (zhi2 qin2 = attends-to-shift-duties), does 後勤 (hou4 qin2 = back-up-diligent = odd jobs). Loyalist army 勤王 (qin2 wang2 = attend/support-king = fights to defend king).

In early 20th century, young Chinese communists 周恩來 (Zhou1 En1 Lai2), 鄧小平 (Deng4 Xiao3 Ping2) etc. studied in Europe on government-funded 勤工儉學 (qin2 gong1 jian4 xue2 = diligent-work-frugal-study = work-study) program.

by Diana Yue