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 Los Angeles

Putonghua pronunciation: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: work, engineering, industry

Pictogram 工 resembles 工具 (gong1 jū4 = working-tools). 工人 (gong1 ren2 = work-ers) 工作 (gong1 zuo2 = work-do = work) in 工廠 (gong1 cang3 = work-factories), earn 工資 (gong1 zī1 = work-capital = wages).

工業家 (gong1 ye4 jia1 = work-industry-master = industrialists) dislike 工會 (gong1 hui4 = workers-unions) for organizing 罷工 (ba4 gong1 = abandon-work = strikes).

California has 精密工業 (jing1 mi4 gong1 ye4 = fine-intricate-work-industry = sophisticated industries) making 飛機 (fei1 ji1 = flying-machine = airplanes), 電腦 (dian4 náo3 = electric-brain = computer). 加州理工學院 (jia1 zhou1 li3 gong1 xué2 yuan4 = “Cal”-transliterated-state-reason-technology-studies-college) = California Institute of Technology, Caltech) trains 工程師 (gong1 cheng2 shī1 = work-process-master = engineers).

by Diana Yue