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!”

by Diana Yue