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 leisure

忙
Putonghua pronunciation: mang2
Cantonese pronunciation: mong4
Meanings: busy, hasty

Character 忙 = 心 (xìn, heart) + 死 (wàng, die/dead): 忙人 (dà4 mang2 ren2 = big/very-busy-person)'s heart/soul is often dead/insensitive.

Bees/hardworking people are always 忙碌 (máng2 luò4 = busy/laboring), 忙十著工作 (máng2 zé0 gōng1 zuò2 = busy-continuous-work-labor = busy working). Aborted projects mean 白忙 (bái2 măng2 = white/empty-busy = work wasted).

In 忙亂 (máng2 luan4 = busy/hasty-confused/disorganized) situation we 慌忙 (huáng1 măng2 = panic-busy = hastily/desperately) ask friends to 幫忙 (bang1 mang2 = help-busy = help). “幫幫忙!” (bang1 bang1 mang2 = help-help-busy) = “幫個忙!” (bang4 ge4 mang2 = give-a-help) = “Please, help/spare me!” 幫倒忙 (bang1 dào3 mang2 = help-overnorth-busy) = try to help but make things worse.

by Diana Yue