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 the underclass

僕
Putonghua pronunciation: pu2
Cantonese pronunciation: buk3
Meanings: servant

僕 (仆 = 人 ren2 carrying things) means 僕人 (仆2 ren2 = servant-person = servant). Nobleman’s home 僕婢如雲 (仆4 pu2 ru2 yün2 = maids-servants-resemble-clouds = had countless servants): 管家 (guan3 jia1 = manage-home = butler/housekeeper), 侍婢 (shi4 bi4 = serving-girls/maids), 廚師 (chu2 shi1 = kitchen-master = chefs/cooks), 園丁 (yuan2 ding1 = garden-man = gardeners), 轎夫 (jiao4 fu1 = sedan-chair-men/carriers).

僕從 (仆2 cong2 = servants-aides/assistants) surround tycoon. Sancho Panza was Don Quixote’s 老僕 (lao3 pu2 = old/longtime-servant), 忠僕 (zhong1 pu2 = loyal/dedicated-servant). In olden-day China’s western establishments/restaurants, calling “僕歐!” (pu2 ou1) meant “Boy!” (servant/waiter).

公僕 (gong1 pu2 = public-servants) means 政府僱員 (zheng4 fu3 gu4 yün2 = administration-bureau-employed-members = government employees).

by Diana Yue