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

勞 (two 火 huo3, fire + 亻 house + 力 li4, strength) = 勞動 (lao2 dong4 = work-move = labor), 勤勞 (qin2 lao2 = diligent-hardworking). Brain-users 好逸惡勞 (hao4 yi4 wu4 lao2 = like-leisure/freedom-dislike-toil), fear 勞改營 (lao2 gai3 ying2 = labor-reform-camp = labor camp).

In 労資談判 (lao2 zi1 tan2 pan4 = workers-capitalists-talk-adjudication = employer-employees negotiations), 勞工 (lao2 gong1 = laborers-workers) emphasize their 功勞 (gong1 lao2 = achievement-labor = contributions), insist 多勞多得 (duo1 lao2 duo1 de2 = more-work-more-gain/pay).

勞累 (lao2 lei4 = work-fatigue) causes 筋骨勞損 (jin1 gu3 lao2 sun3 = tendons-bones-toil-hurt = body-frame weakened/hurt), even 過勞死 (guo4 lao2 si3 = over-work-die = Japanese term karoshi = overworked person's sudden death).

by Diana Yue