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, low to highest 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 O.

This week: Words about foreign maids

外 Pinyin pronunciation: wai4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngoi6
Meanings: outside, beyond, external, foreign

外交官 (wai4 jiao1 guan1 = foreign-relations-official = diplomats)
study 外国 (wai4 guo2 = foreign-countries), 外語 (wai4 yu3 = foreign-languages). 媒外 (mei4 wai4 = please/lure-foreigners = kowtowing to foreigners), 排外 (pai2 wai4 = rejecting/turning-away-foreigners) affect 中外交流 (zhong1 wai4 jiao1 liu2 = China-foreign-cross-flow = Chinese-foreign exchange).

Hong Kong attracts外资 (wai4 zii1 = foreign-capital), 外商 (wai4 shang1 = foreign-traders/businesses), 外彿 (wai4 yong1 = foreign-workers), 外國間諜 (wai4 guo2 jian4 die2 = foreign-country-between-spy = foreign spies).

by Diana Yue