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 foreign maids

佣
Putonghua pronunciation: yong1
Cantonese pronunciation: yung4
Meanings: hired, labourer, servant

佣 (radical 亻 = person ren2, person) means hired labourer/servant. In 僚僱關係 (gu4 yong1 guan1 xi4 = employer-employee-relationship), 僚主 (gu4 zhu3 = employer-master = employer) hires 僚工 (yong1 gong1 = hired-workers), pays 僚酬 (yong1 chou2 = work-reward = wages).

佣耕 (yong1 geng1 = hired-laborer-till-soil) = hired farmer. 僚僱兵 (gu4 yong1 bing1 = hired-work-soldier) = mercenary soldier. 家僱 (jia1 yong1 = home-hired-worker) = domestic servant/helper.

佣女 (wai4 yong1 = foreign-servants) are usually 住家女佣 (zhu4 jia1 nu3 yong1 = live-in-female-servants): 菲佣 (fei1 yong1 = "Phi"-lippina-transliterated-maids), 泰佣 (tai4 yong1 = "Thai"-transliterated-maids), 印佣 (yin4 yong1 = "In"-donesian-transliterated-maids) doing 一脚踢 (yi1 jiao3 ti1 = Cantoanese "yat1 geuk3 tek3" = one-foot-kick = all household chores).

by Diana Yue