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

管
Putonghua pronunciation: guan3
Cantonese pronunciation: goon2
Meanings: manage, control, regulate

管 (radical 竹 zhu2, bamboo) = 管理 (guan3 li3 = handle/control-tend = manage), 管制 (guan3 zhi4 = manage-control). Ruler 管治 (guan3 zhi4 = controls-rules) country. Parents 管教 (guan3 jiao1 = discipline-educate) children.

管人 (guan3 ren2 = managing-people/personnel) is difficult. 工商管理 (gong1 shang1 guan3 li3 = industry-commerce-control-manage) = business administration. 員工管理 (yuan2 gong1 guan3 li3 = member-worker-control-manage) = employees/staff management. Disobedient maid 不聽話 (bu4 ting4 hua4 = no-listen-words = won’t obey instructions), 不受管 (bu4 shou4 guan3 = no-accept-control = can’t be controlled/disciplined).

“我不管!” (wo3 bu4 guan3 = I-no-control/bother) = “I don’t care!” 管不了! (guan3 bu4 liao3 = control-no--ed) = “No use interfering!” or “It can’t be helped!”

by Diana Yue