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 Moses crossing the Red Sea

追 (radical 足 = walk/leave) = trail/pursue/chase speedily/persistently. Man 追求 (zhui1 qiu2 = chases-woos) woman. Disciple 追随 (zhui1 sui2 = follows-accompanies) teacher, 追尋 (zhui1 xun2 = pursues-seeks) religious truth.

Police 追蹤 (zhui1 zong1 = pursues-trails) suspect, 追問 (zhui1 wen4 = persistently-questions) witness. Creditors 追債 (zhui1 zhai4 = chase/demand-debt-payment). Cars on highway 你追我 趕 (ni3 zhui1 wo3 gan3 = you-pursue-I-chase = competed for speed), caused 追尾事故 (zhui1 wei3 shi4 gu4 = chase-tail-incident = second car, going too fast, hits front car's rear).

Moses led Israelites to leave Egypt. Egyptian army 窮追不捨 (qiong2 zhui1 bu4 she3 = exhaust-chase-no-abandon = kept chasing). 窮追猛打 (qiong2 zhui1 meng3 da3 = exhaust-chase-fierce-beat) = persecution without sparing.

by Diana Yue