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 removing obstacles

移 Putonghua pronunciation: yi2
Cantonese pronunciation: yi4
Meaning: shift, move, change, transfer

移 (禾 he2, crop + 多 duo1, plentiful) means 移動 (yi2 dong4 = shift-move), 遷移 (qian1 yi2 = move-home-migrate). Farmer 移植 (yi2 zhi2 = trans-plants) shoots. Janitor 移走 (yi2 zou3 = move-run/go/off = 移去 yi2 qū4 = move-away) rubbish. 移開 (yi2 kai1 = move-open-up) = “Give way!”

Parents 移民 (yi2 min2 = move-abode = emigrate), 移交 (yi2 jiao1 = pass-give) apartment to son. Grifters 轉移 (zhuang3 yi2 = turn-shift) target’s attention, 移花接木 (yi2 hua1 jie2 mu4 = like grafting, move-flower-connect-wood), swap cards.

移風易俗 (yi2 feng1 yi4 su2 = shift-wind/trend-change-practice = changing people’s habits/beliefs) takes patience, like 懦公移山 (Yu2 Gong1 yi2 shan1 = the Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains).