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 blind groping

摸 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) = 触摸 (chu4 mo1 = feel-touch/fondle-with-hand). 摸索 (mo1 suo3 = grope-seek) = grope.
 Guerrillas 摸黑 (mo1 hei1 = grope-black/dark = in dark night) march. Woman sues man for 摸手摸脚 (mo1 shou3 mo1 jiao3 = fondling/fingerng-her-hands/arms-fondling/fingering-her-feet/legs). 偷偷摸摸 (tou1 tou1 mo1 mo1 = steal-steal-feel-feel = stealthy/stealthily) describes illegal liaisons.

Spy 順藤摸瓜 (shun4 teng2 mo1 gua1 = follow-creeper/vine-grope-for-melon/gourd = follows clues), 摸清 (mo1 qing1 = feel-clear = sees through) enemy’s plans.

“摸著石頭過河” (mo1 zhu4 shi2 tou2 guo4 he2 = feel-ing-stone-head-cross-river = wade across river by feeling/touching stones underwater = “Proceed empirically”) is 鄧小平 (Deng4 Xiao3 Ping2 = Deng Xiaoping, 1904-1997)’s reform motto.

by Diana Yue