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 Flaming Mountains

Putonghua pronunciation: dang3
Cantonese pronunciation: dong2
Meanings: obstruct, block, ward off, dodge

擋 (手 shou3, hand + 當 dang1, confront) means obstruct. Umbrella 擋雨 (dang3 yu3 = fends-off-rain). Boxer 擋開 (dang3 kai1 = wards-off) blow. 擋風玻璃 (dang3 feng1 bo1 li3 = obstruct-wind-glass) = windscreen.

螳臂擋車 (tang2 bi4 dang3 che1 = praying-mantis’ arm-obstructing-cart) means weakly/hopelessly trying to 阻擋 (zhu2 dang3 = stop/dodge-obstruct) powerful attacker/invader.

Xinjiang’s 火焰山 (Hu3 Yan4 Shan1 = fire-flame-mountain-range = Flaming Mountains) are on the北緯路 (bei3 si1 lu4 = northern-Silk-Road). Sunlit 花崗岩 (hua1 gang1 yan2 = motley-hill-rock = granite) looks like火焰 (huo3 yan4 = fiery-flames). In Journey to the West, the mountains are real火舌 (huo3 she2 = fire-tongue = tongues of fire), 擋路 (dang3 lu4 = blocking-the-way).

by Diana Yue