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 San Francisco

Putonghua pronunciation: shan1
Cantonese pronunciation: saan1
Meaning: hill, mountain

山 means hill/mountain: 高山 (gao1 shan1 = tall-mountain), 雪山 (xue3 shan1 = snowy-peak), 冰山 (bing1 shan1 = ice-berg), 火山 (huo3 shan1 = fire-mountain = volcano), 爬山 (pa2 shan1 = climb-mountain = mountaineering). Radical 山 indicates hilly features: 峰 (feng1, peak), 嶺 (ling3, range).

山民 (shan1 min2 = mountain-people) = rustics. 山河 (shan1 he2 = hills-rivers) means country’s expansive territory/landscapes. 青山不老 (qing1 shan1 bu4 lao3 = blue-green-hills- no-old/age) praises timeless landscape or person’s perennial spirit/youthfulness.

金山銀山 (jin1 shan1 yin2 shan1 = gold-mountain-silver-mountain) means inexhaustible wealth. San Francisco’s old Chinese name 舊金山 (Jiu4 Jin1 Shan1 = literally “old-gold-mountain”) yielded term “金山伯” (Jin1 Shan1 bo2 = gold-mountain-uncles, America’s earlier generations of Chinese male migrant-workers).

by Diana Yue