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 moving

根 (radical 木 mu4 = wood, tree)
Putonghua pronunciation: gen1
Cantonese pronunciation: gan1
Meanings: root, base

根鬚 (gen1 xu1 = roots-beard = roots) give plants anchorage/nourishment. Banyan trees have 氣根 (qi4 gen1 = air-roots). Words have 詞根 (ci2 gen1 = word-root = radicals). Chronic patient seeks ailment’s 根治 (gen1 zhi4 = root-heal = thorough treatment/eradication).

Civilizations have 根源 (gen1 yuan2 = root-source = origins). Traditional thinking/habits are 根深蒂固 (gen1 shen1 di4 gu4 = roots-deep-bud-firm = deeply rooted/entrenched).

根據 (gen1 ju4 = root-evidence = according to) surveys, many foreign settlers feel 失根 (shi1 gen1 = lose-roots = uprooted/lost), 無根 (wu2 gen1 = have-no-roots = rootless/drifting), cannot re-establish career’s 根基 (gen1 jil1 = root-base = base/foundation). Overseas Chinese 尋根 (xun2 gen1 = search-roots = visit ancestral village/town to find sense of identity/belonging).

by Diana Yue