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

變
Putonghua pronunciation: biann4
Cantonese pronunciation: bin3
Meanings: change, transform, transformation

變 = 變化 (bian4 hua4 = change-transformation), 變遷 (bian4 qian1 = change-move-away = change situation/status): 變好 (bian4 hao3 = change-for-better), 變壞 (bian4 huai4 = change-for-worse). Husband 變心 (bian4 xin1 = changes-heart, loves another). 政變 (zheng4 bian4 = political-change/coup) causes 變天 (bian4 tian1 = change-sky = weather/regime change).

Magician/illusionist 變走 (bian4 zou3 = change-run/gone = vanishes) tiger. 變臉 (bian4 lian3 = changing-face) means turn hostile or Sichuan opera’s specialty: singer’s imperceptibly-quick changing of opera-mask.

Monkey knows 七十二變 (qi1 shi2 er4 bian4 = seven-ten-two-changes = seventy-two/endless ways of self-transforming disguises), 變成 (bian4 cheng2 = changes/turns-into) a fly, flies into Iron Fan Princess’s stomach, upsets it, makes her 色變 (se1 bian4 = color/countenance-change = grow pale with fear).

by Diana Yue