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 hiking

遠 (yūan3)
Putonghua pronunciation: yūan3
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen5
Meanings: far, distant, remote, distance (verb)

遠 (radical 亅 = 足, chuo4, walk far) describes relative distance.遠處 (yūan3 chu4 = distant-place) means somewhat far (e.g. gas-station). 遠在天邊 (yūan3 zai4 tian1 bian1 = far-at-sky’s-edge) describes unreachable thing (on the horizon). To Europeans, 遠東 (yūan3 dong1 = the Far East) is遠方 (yūan3 fang1 = faraway-region).

State-leaders having遠見 (yūan3 jian4 = far-reaching-sight/vision) develop遠程導彈 (yūan3 cheng2 dao3 dan4 = far-journey-guide-bomb = long-range guided missile carrying bomb). 敬而遠之 (jing4 er2 yūan3 zhi1 = respect-and/but-distance-him/her) describes wary/remote attitude towards suspicious/formidable person.

遠足 (yūan3 zu2 = far-foot) = hiking. Inexperienced hiker兜遠路 (dou1 yūan3 lu4 = wind-far-road = took the longer route), comforts himself: “不遠 (bu4 yūan3 = not-far!)”

by Diana Yue