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

足 Putonghua pronunciation: zu2
Cantonese pronunciation: juk1
Meanings: foot

足 = 腳 (jiao3 = foot/feet). 足浴 (zu2 yu4 = foot-bath) soothes 足部 (zu2 bu4 = foot-part). 香港腳 (xiang1 gang3 jiao3 = Hong Kong foot) is 足疾 (zu2 jii2 = foot-disease). 足跡 (zu2 zhi1 = foot-track) = footprint.

Ecstatic person 手舞足蹈 (shou3 wu3 zu2 dao3 = hands-wave-feet-dance = waves hands and feet). 手足 (shou3 zu2 = hand-foot) also means brother/buddy.

Women who 纏足 (chan2 zu2 = bound-their-feet) had 小腳 (xiao2 jiao3 = small-feet = bound feet). Today Chinese women have 天足 (tian1 zu2 = nature/natural-feet = unbound feet), can 赤足 (chi4 zu2 = go bare-feet), 遠足 (yu3 zu2 = far-foot = go hiking), 踢足球 (ti4 zu2 qiu2 = kick-foot-ball = play football/ soccer).