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

杖 Putonghua pronunciation: zhang4 Cantonese pronunciation: jeung6
Meanings: stick, pole, cane, staff, club

杖 (radical 木 mu4, wood) is long-shaped 棍 (gun4 = stick = stick/pole/staff/club). Serf is 杖責 (zhang4 ze2 = stick-reprimand = beaten with stick) by master. Criminals fear 杖刑 (zhang4 xing2 = stick-torture = stick-beating punishment), 擻麵 棍 (gan3 mian4 gun4 = roll/knead-flour/dough-stick = rolling pin) is short, small 木杖 (mu4 zhang4 = wooden-stick).

Pope/Emperor carries ceremonial 權杖 (qüan2 zhang4 = power/authority-stick/staff = mace). Shao-lin warrior monk wields 鐵杖 (tie3 zhang4 = iron-stick). Blind man/beggar feels his way with 竹杖 (zhu2 zhang4 = bamboo-stick/pole).

English gentleman carries elegant 手杖 (shou3 zhang4 = hand-stick = walking cane/staff). Cripple needs 拐杖 (guai3 zhang4 = twisted/limping-stick = walking stick). Hiker uses 行山杖 (xing2 shan1 zhang4 = walk-hill/mountain-stick = hiking stick).

by Diana Yue