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 Buddha subduing Monkey

翻 (fan1, turn/round + 羽 yu3, feathers) means flip/turn-over. Waves 翻滚 (fan1 gun3 = turn-roll = roll). Cook 翻動 (fan1 dong4 = flips-moves/stirs) pancakes. Designer 翻新 (fan1 xin1 = turn-new = remodels/renovates) apartment. Liberated slaves 翻身 (fan1 shen1 = turn-body = get new/better status).

Researcher 翻閱 (fan1 yue4 = flips-through-reads) journals, 翻來覆去 (fan1 lai3 fu1 qu4 = flip-come-repeat-go = repeatedly) checks data, 翻譯 (fan1 yi4 = turns-over-translates = translates) records.

孫悟空 (Sun1 Wu4 Kong1 = surname-Sun-understand-emptiness = Monkey) 翻白眼 (fan1 bai2 yan3 = turn-white-eyes = rolls eyes), 翻跟斗 (fan1 gen1 dou3 = turn-heel-bin = turns somersaults), causes 天翻地覆 (tian1 fan1 di4 fu1 = heaven-turns-over-earth-falls = great havoc) in Heaven.

by Diana Yue