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 the Foolish Old Man

Putonghua pronunciation: yu2
Cantonese pronunciation: yue4
Meanings: foolish, stupid, dumb

Adjective 愚 = 愚蠢 (yu2 chun3 = stupid-dumb), 愚鈍 (yu2 dun4 = stupid-rough/un-refined = slow-witted/dumb).

Verb 愚 = 愚弄 (yu2 nong4 = stupid/fool-play = trick/deceive).

愚民政策 (yu2 min2 zheng4 ce4 = fool-masses-political-strategy) = policies which insult people's intelligence. 愚人節 (yu2 ren2 jie2 = fool-people-festival) = April Fool's Day.


by Diana Yue