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

公

Putonghua pronunciation: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: oldster, respectable senior

公 = man of high generation/rank; 叔公 (shu1 gong1 = uncle-grand-oldster = grand-uncle), 外公 (wai4 gong1 = external-grand-oldster = grandpa on mother's side). Woman’s 公公 (gong1 gong1 = oldster-oldster), 婆婆 (po2 po2 = grandma-grandma) are her father- and mother-in-law. Colloquially, 老公 (lao3 gong1 = old-oldster), 老婆 (lao3 po2 = old-grandma) mean husband, wife.

公爵 (gong1 jue2 = oldster-noble-title) = duke. Octogenarians are 老公公 (lao3 gong1 gong0 = old-grandpa-grandpa), 老婆婆 (lao3 po2 po0 = old-grandma-grandma).

Chinese mythology features 土地公 (tu3 di4 gong1 = earth-land-oldster = local god living underground), 雷公 (lei2 gong1 = thunder-god). 天公 (tian1 gong1 = heaven-oldster = God of Sky) helped 愚公 (yu2 gong1 = foolish-old-man) to move mountains away.

by Diana Yue