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

移 = 移動 (yi2 dong4 = shift-position-move): 移開 (yi2 kai1 = move-open = move aside) road-block, 轉移 (zhuang3 yi2 = turn-shift = transfer) assets. Outgoing regime 移交 (yi2 jiao1 = move-deliver = transfers) powers to new government. 移民 (yi2 min2 = shift-people/citizen) = emigration.

Women’s uterus 內膜移位 (nei4 mo4 yi2 wei4 = internal-membrane-change-site = wall-lining-shift-position = endometriosis) causes menstrual pain. Farmers/surgeons 移植 (yi2 zhi2 = move-plant = transplant) plants/body organs. Fickle lover 移情別戀 (yi2 qing2 bie2 lian3 = shift-feeling-other-love = goes for another).

Although 物換星移 (wu4 huan4 xing1 yi2 = things-change-stars-move = world changes, time passes), Foolish Old Man vows to 移走 (yi2 zhou3 = move-run = move away) two big mountains.

by Diana Yue