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

喻 = comparison. Writers use 明喻 (ming2 yu4 = clear/lit-up-comparison = comparisons), 暗喻 (an4 yu4 = dark/un-lit-comparison = metaphors), 象喻 (xiang4 yu4 = image-comparison = images).

Thinkers tell 故事 (gu4 shi4 = cause-events = stories), 寓言 (yu4 yan2 = imply-words = fable), 比喻 (bi3 yu4 = compare-inform = allegories/parables). Listeners learn 教訓 (jiao4 xun4 = teach-lecture = lesson/moral).

Aesop’s fable 龟兔赛跑 (gui1 tu4 sai4 pao3 = tortoise-hare-compete-run = Hare and Tortoise Race), Chinese fable 愚公移山 (Foolish Old Man Removed Mountains) both stress importance of 毅力 (yi4 li4 = courage-strength = courage). Mao Ze-dong extended 愚公移山's moral: "China must remove 兩座大山 (liang3 zuo4 da4 shan1 = two-blocks-of-big-mountains): feudalism, imperialism!"

by Diana Yue