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: shan1
Cantonese pronunciation: saan1
Meanings: mountain

Character 山 (resembling three peaks/humps) is also a radical for words associated with mountain: 峰 (feng1, peak), 嶺 (ling3, range), 崖 (ya2, cliff), 坡 (po1, slope), 嵯 (jun4, hilly/steep). 山路 (shan1 lu4 = mountain-roads/paths) cut through 大山 (da4 shan1 = big-mountains), 小丘 (xiao3 qiu1 = small-hills/mounds). 山河 (shan1 he2 = mountains-rivers) = country's terrain/territory. 爬山者 (pa2 shan1 zhe3 = climb-mountain-person = mountaineer) dreams of conquering 雪山 (xue3 shan1 = snow-capped-mountain/peak). Painters visit 名山大川 (ming2 shan1 da4 chuan1 = famous-mountains-big-rivers), paint 山水畫 (shan1 shui3 hua4 = mountain-water-picture = landscapes). 高山仰止 (gao1 shan1 yang2 zhi3 = high-mountain-look-up-stop) describes awe-inspiring figure, e.g. hero, thinker. 出山 (chu1 shan1 = exit/leave-mountain) describes retiree re-entering profession to demonstrate talent/authority.

by Diana Yue