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 myth of mending the sky

塌
Putonghua pronunciation: ta4
Cantonese pronunciation: taap3
Meanings: collapse, cave-in

Chinese mythology describes 水灾 (shui3 zai1 = water-disaster = floods/deluge), 火灾 (huo3 zai1 = fire-disaster), 地震 (di4 zhen4 = earth-quakes).

水神 (shui3 shen2 = water-god, called 共工 Gong4 Gong1) rebelled, was defeated by 火神 (huo3 shen2 = fire-god, called 祝融 Zhu1 Rong2). Gong-gong angrily rammed his head against 不周山 (Bu4 Zhou1 Shan1 = Bu-zhou Mountain) which 支撑 (zhi1 cheng1 = supported-/propped-up) the Western World. 天塌地陷 (tian1 ta4 di4 xian4 = sky-collapsed-earth-crumbled)! People yelled: 天塌了! (tian1 ta4 le0 = sky-fall-ed = The sky has fallen!) 世界末日! (shi4 jie4 mo4 ri4 = world-territory-last-day = It’s the end of the world!)

塌方 (ta4 fang1 = collapse-area) means landslide or buildings/mines caving-in.

by Diana Yue