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

煉 (radical 火 huo3, fire) means make/refine by burning/heating: 提煉 (ti2 lian4 = take-extract) mineral/perfume from ores/flowers, 煉鋼 (lian4 gang1 = smelt-steel = steel-smelting), 煉油 (lian4 you2 = extract/refine-oil), 煉煉 (duan4 lian4 = smelt-refine = rigorously strengthen) body/spirit.

Daoist priests 煉丹 (lian4 dan1 = extract-pill = concoct medicinal/immortality pills), 煉金 (lian4 jin1 = extract-gold = make gold by alchemy). 煉獄 (lian4 yu4 = burning-hell) = purgatory.

When 天塌一角 (tian1 ta4 yi1 jiao3 = sky-collapsed-one-corner = one corner of the sky collapsed), 天河 (tian1 he2 = Heavenly River)'s water flooded the world. Goddess 女媧 (nu3 wa1 = Nuwa) 煉石 (lian4 shi2 = burnt/refined-rocks/stones), made them 色彩斑斓 (se1 cai3 ban1 lian4 = colors-hues-medley-brilliant = brilliant, multi-colored).

by Diana Yue