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

補 (radical 衣 yī, clothes) = mend/replenish: budget’s 補助 (bù 3 zhu4 = mend-aid = additional funding), speaker’s 補充 (bù 3 chōng1 = mend-fill = additional explanation), maltreated person’s 補償 (bù 3 chāng2 = mend-repay = compensation), army’s 補給 (bù 3 gěi3 = mend-give = replenishments), salaryman’s 補薪 (bù 3 xīn1 = mend-salary = back-pay), first choice’s 後補 (hòu 4 bù 3 = behind-replace = reserve).

Vitamins can 補身 (bù 3 shēn1 = mend/strengthen-body). Weak students need 補習 (bù 3 xí2 = additional-practice/tuition).

After sky’s collapse, like seamstress mending torn coat with 補丁 (bù 3 dīng1 = mend-point = patching), goddess 女媧 (Nu 3 Wāi = Nu-wa) 補救 (bù 3 jiù4 = mended/rescued) the situation, 煉石 (lián4 shī2 = burnt/refined-stones) 補青天 (bù 3 qīng1 tiān1 = mended/patched-up-blue-sky).

by Diana Yue