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 Achilles

Putonghua pronunciation: yong3
Cantonese pronunciation: yung5
Meanings: brave, decisive, daring, powerful, valor, courage, audacity, nerve, guts.

勇 (radical力 li4, strength) = daring/might: penitent’s 勇氣 (yong3 qi4 = brave-spirit = courage) to admit fault, fire-squad’s 英勇 (ying1 yong3 = heroic-brave) action, gladiator’s 神勇 (shen2 yong3 = godlike-physical-might/ferocity). Youths fight with 血之勇 (xue3 qi4 zhi1 yong3 = blood-breath’s-audacity = impulsive daring).

勇敢 (yong3 gan3 = brave-daring) David challenged 勇猛 (yong3 meng3 = powerful-fierce) Goliath. 007智勇雙全 (zhi4 yong3 shuang1 qian2 = wise/intelligent-brave-both-perfect = has brains and can fight).

Homer’s 史詩 (shi3 shi1 = history/epic-poems) described 諸神 (zhu1 shen2 = many-gods = gods/goddesses) and 英雄 (ying1 xiong2 = heroic-mighty = heroes). 阿喀里斯 (A4 Ke4 Li3 Si1 = “Achilles”-transliterated) was Greece’s greatest 勇士 (yong3 shi4 = brave/fierce/mighty-warrior).

by Diana Yue