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

Putonghua pronunciation: "cheng1"  
Cantonese pronunciation: "chaang1"  
Meanings: stretch out, prop up, support

Verb 撐 (radical 手 = shou3 = hand/arm) means stretch/push up: 撐開 (cheng1 kai1 = flare-open) umbrella, 撐杆跳高 (cheng1 gan1 tiao4 gao1 = push-pole-jump-high = pole vault), 撐腰 (cheng1 yao1 = support-waist = voice/give support for someone).

After 煉石補青天 (lian4 shi2 bu3 qing1 tian1 = burn/refine-stones-mend-blue-sky), 女媧 (Nu3 Wa1 = Nu-wa) must find 支柱 (zhi1 zhu4 = supporting-pillars) for sky.

Nu-wa broke off 神龜 (shen2 gui1 = god-tortoise = sacred tortoise)'s four legs, used them to 撐起 (cheng1 qi3 = support/prop-up) sky's 四極 (si4 ji2 = four-ultimates = four edges/corners): 東極 (dong1 ji2 = east-pole), 南極 (nan2 ji2 = south-pole), 西極 (xi1 ji2 = west-pole), 北極 (bei3 ji2 = north-pole).

by Diana Yue