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 Prometheus

火 Putonghua pronunciation: huo3 Cantonese pronunciation: foh2 Meanings: fire

火 = fire/passion. 火炬 (huo3 ju4 = fire-hold-up = burning torch) radiates 熱 (re4, heat), 光 (guang1, light). 火山 (huo3 shan1 = fire-mountain) = volcano. 火箭 (huo3 jian4 = fire-arrow) = rocket.

Chinese myth says 燹人氏 (sui4 ren2 shi4 = ignite-person-sire = Fire Discoverer) 燹木取火 (zuan1 mu4 qu2 huo3 = screwed/scrubbed-wood-kindle-fire). Revolutionaries believe 星星之火, 可以燎原 (xing1 xing1 zhi1 huo3, ke2 yi3 liao2 yuan2 = star-star-’s -fire, can-thus-burn-plain), i.e. 火花 (huo3 hua1 = fire-flower = sparks) becoming 火舌 (huo3 she2 = fire-tongue = flames) can inflame the world.

Prometheus stole 火種 (huo3 zhong3 = fire-seed = kindling), made gods 怒火中燒 (nu4 huo3 zhong1 shao1 = anger-fire-inside-burn = furious with rage).