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 Chinese sun god

Putonghua pronunciation: ri4
Cantonese pronunciation: yat6
Meanings: sun, day

Pictogram 日 shows ☐ (square/circle) enclosing dot/horizontal stroke, emitting 光 (guang1, light). 日 = 太陽 (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-yang/male-essence) = sun (Latin sol). 日光 (ri4 guang1) = 陽光 (yang2 guang1) = sunlight. 太陽系 (tai4 yang2 xi4 = ultimate-yang/male-essence-system) = solar system.

Peasants 日出而作, 日入而息 (ri4 chu1 er2 zuo4, ri3 ru4 er2 xi1 = sun-out-and-work, sun-in-and-rest = work daily/diligently/regularly until nightfall). 指天誓日 (zhi3 tian1 shi4 ri4 = point-heaven-vow/swear/oath-sun) = emphasize/swear by the sun.

Chinese myth describes 十日并出 (shi2 ri4 bing4 chu1 = ten-suns-together-out/shining = ten suns appearing simultaneously). Under 烈日 (lie4 ri4 = violent-sun = strong/oppressive sunlight), plants/animals/humans 曬死 (shai4 si3 = sun-shine-tan-die = die from the sun’s heat/glare).

by Diana Yue