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

罰 Putonghua pronunciation: fa2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: punish

罰 = 處罰 (chu3 fa2 = treat-punish = punish). Sinners/criminals/offenders 犯罪 (fan4 zui4 = commit-sin), 犯法 (fan4 fa3 = offend/ violate-law), 犯規 (fan4 gui1 = offend/violate-rule), 被罰 (bei4 fa2 = are-punished).

Judge 判罰 (pan4 fa2 = judge/assess-punish = metes out punishment). Offenders get 刑罰 (xing2 fa2 = sentence-punishment): 入獄 (ru4 yu4 = enter-prison = imprisonment), 罰錢 (fa2 qian2 = penalty-fine), 罰跪 (fa2 gui4 = punish-kneel = punitive kneeling session).《罪與罰》(zui4 yu3 fa2) is Chinese title of Dostoyesvky’s novel Crime and Punishment.

Prometheus was 重罰 (zhong4 fa2 = heavily/severely-punished) by 宙斯 (Zhou4 Sil = “Zeus”-transliterated), king of the gods, for stealing fire and giving it to 人類 (ren2 lei4 = human-species = mankind).

by Diana Yue