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: yang2
Cantonese pronunciation: yeung4
Meanings: male, sun, yang

太陽 (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-yang/male-essence) = 日 (ri4, sun). 太陽系 (tai4 yang2 xi4 = ultimate-yang/male-essence-system) = solar system. 太陽能 (tai4 yang2 neng2 = sun-energy) = solar energy.

In traditional Chinese philosophy, 日 (sun) symbolizes 陽 (yang2, masculinity/strength), 月 (yüe4, moon) symbolizes 陰 (yin1, femininity/gentleness). Taoist symbol 太極 (tai4 ji2 = supreme-ultimate = Tai-chi/Tai-ji = semi-black semi-white circle) indicates co-existence of Yin and Yang in all things. Man’s penis is 陽具 (yang2 jü4 = male-organ), woman’s vagina is 隱戶 (yin1 hu4 = female-chamber).

陰陽 also means dark and light. 阳台 (yang2 tai2 = sun-terrace) = verandah. We inhabit 順間 (yang2 jian1 = sun/male-area = world of the living). Ghosts inhabit 陰間 (yin1 jian1 = moon/female-area = hell).

by Diana Yue