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

肝

Putonghua pronunciation: gan1
Cantonese pronunciation: gon1
Meanings: liver

肝 (= 肝臟 gan1 zang4 = liver-internal-organ = liver) is internal器官 (qi4 guan1 = instrument-control/manage = organ).
Patients with 肝癌 (gan1 ai2 = liver-cancer), 肝炎 (gan1 yan2 = liver-infection = hepatitis) need 换肝 (huan4 gan1 = exchange-liver = liver transplantation).

心肝 (xin1 gan1 = heart-liver) = darling. Sworn brothers 肝膽相照 (gan1 dan3 xiang1 zhao4 = liver-gall-bladder-mutual~shine/ reflect = pledge loyalty/life to each other). 動肝火 (dong4 gan1 huo3 = move-liver~fire) = get angry. 肝腸寸斷 (gan1 chang2 cun4 duan4 = liver-intestines-inch-break) = terrible heartbreak.

Zeus punished Prometheus: 纏縛 (kun2 bang3 = bundle-tie = tied) him up, let eagle 啄食 (zhuo2 shi2 = peck-eat) his liver everyday forever. 鵝肝醬 (er2 gan1 jiang4 = goose-liver-pâté).

by Diana Yue