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

炎

Putonghua pronunciation: yan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yim4
Meanings: hot, fever, inflammation

炎 (radical 火 huo3, fire) shows two 火, means heat/hot/fever. 炎热 (yan2 re4 = feverishly-hot). In 炎夏 (yan2 xia4 = hot- summer) people easily contract 炎症 (yan2 zheng4 = hot-illness = fevers).

Untreated wounds may 發炎 (fa1 yan2 = develop-heat = become inflamed). 腸胃炎 (chang2 wei4 yan2 = intestines-stomach-fever) = stomach fever. Aspirin is a 消炎藥 (xiao1 yan2 yao4 = allay/ reduce-inflammation-drug = drug for fever/pain relief).

肝炎 (gan1 yan2 = liver-fever) = hepatitis. 腦膜炎 (nao3 mo2 yan2 = brain-membrane-fever) = meningitis.

炎涼 (yan2 liang2 = hot-cool) are opposites. Bankrupt person experiences 世態炎涼 (shi4 tai4 yan2 liang2 = world-attitude-hot-cool = first gets treated warmly, then gets the cold shoulder — it’s an unkind, snobbish world!)

by Diana Yue