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 Flaming Mountains

扇
Putonghua pronunciation: shan4
Cantonese pronunciation: sin3
Meanings: fan

扇子 (shan4 zi0 = fan-diminutive) = fan: 擊扇 (zhe2 shan4 = foldable-fans), 團扇 (tuan2 shan4 = circular-shaped-fans). Verb 扇 (shan4) means 搖扇 (yao2 shan4 = wave fan). 擊涼 (shan4 liang2 = fan-cool) means waving fan to cool somebody/something. 電風扇 (dian4 feng1 shan4 = electric-wind-fans) = electric fan.

撫風點火 (shan4 feng1 dian3 huo3 = fan-up-wind-ignite-fire) means stirring up anger/clashes among people. 秋後扇 (qi1 hou4 shan4 = autumn-later-fan = fan after autumn) describes person dumped after being exploited.

牛魔王 (niu2 mo2 wang2 = Bull-Demon-King) ruled Flaming Mountains. His wife 鐵扇公主 (tie3 shan4 gong1 zhu3 = Iron-Fan-Princess)’s magic 芭蕉扇 (ba1 jiao1 shan4 = Banana-Fan) could 擊熄 (shan4 xi1 = fan-and-extinguish) the flames.

by Diana Yue