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

弓
Putonghua pronunciation: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: bow

Ideogram 弓 has shape resembling bent bow. Archer uses 弓箭 (gong1 jian4 = bow-and-arrow). In Chinese mythology, great archer 后羿 (Hou4 Yi4 = Hou Yi) used 神弓 (shen2 gong1 = god-bow = magic/mighty-bow) and shot down nine suns. Violinist moves 琴弓 (qin2 gong1 = violin-bow) on 琴弦 (qin2 xuan2 = violin-strings), practices 弓法 (gong1 fa3 = bowing- techniques). 弓形 (gong1 xing2 = bow-shape) = bow/arc-shaped. 弓身为礼 (gong1 shen1 wei2 li3 = bow-body-as-ritual/courtesy) = make polite bow. 弓腰 (gong1 yao1 = bow-waist) = bend waist like stretched bow forwards or backwards.

Idiom 杯弓蛇影 (bei1 gong1 she2 ying3 = cup-bow-snake-shadow) describes neurotic/suspicious person getting far-fetched fears/illusions — thought a bow’s shadow was a snake put in his cup.

by Diana Yue