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

熄
Putonghua pronunciation: xì
Cantonese pronunciation: sik1
Meanings: die, extinguish, wither away, put out

Ideogram 熄 (火 huo3, fire + 息 xì, cease/rest/die) indicates fire’s extinction: hearth’s flames 熄灭 (xì mie4 = die-extirminate/extinct = die out). Transitive verb 熄 means extinguishing fire/light: 熄灭 (xì huo3 = turn-off-stove), 熄灯 (xì deng1 = switch-off-light).

Rain 淋熄 (lin2 xì = pour-extinguish = drenches) forest fire.
Wind 吹熄 (chui1 xì = puff-extinguish = blows out) candle. Fire-squad 撲熄 (po4 xì = pounce-on-extinguish = attacks and puts out) big fire.

Monkey takes Iron Fan Princess’s magic 芭蕉扇 (ba1 jiao1 shan4 = Banana-Fan), 捎扇 (hui1 shan4 = waves-fan), 搅三下 (shan4 san1 xia4 = waves-fan-three-times), 搅熄 (shan4 xì = fan-and-extinguish = puts out) flames of 火焰山 (Huò3 Yan4 Shan1 = fire-flame-mountain-range = Flaming Mountains).

by Diana Yue