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 fire

火
Putonghua pronunciation: huo3
Cantonese pronunciation: foh2
Meaning: fire, angry, trendy

火 (character/radical) indicates fire/fiery/burning: 火焰 (huo3 yan4 = fiery-flame), 易燃 (yi4 ran2 = easily-burn/flammable). Cavemen 鑽木取火 (zuan4 mu4 qi3 huo3 = drilled-into-wood-to-obtain/start-fire). Camper uses 火種 (huo3 zhong3 = fire-seed = tinder), 打火機 (da3 huo3 ji1 = hit-fire-machine = lighter) to 生火 (sheng1 huo3 = born/start-a-fire).

縱火 (zong4 huo3 = loosen-fire = arson) creates 火災 (huo3 zai1 = fire-calamity). 救火 (jiu4 huo3 = save-fire) = fire-fighting, 火花 (huo3 hua1 = fire-flowers) = fiery sparks. 星火燎原 (xing1 huo3 liao2 yu2an2 = star-fire-burn-plain) describes small uprising spreading into big revolution.

熱情如火 (re4 qing2 ru2 huo3 = hot/seething-emotion- resemble-fire) describes passionate lover. However, 光火 (guang1 huo3 = light/bright-fire) means flaring up in anger.

by Diana Yue