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 tonic medicines

虚 (radical 声 hui1, tiger’s stripe) means 虚空 (xu1 kong1 = void-empty), 虚假 (xu1 jia3 = untrue-false), 虚僞 (xu1 wei3 = insincere-hypocritical). 虚心 (xu1 xin1 = empty-heart) means modest/humble, but 虚荣心 (xu1 rong2 xin1 = empty-glory-heart) means vanity. 虚无 (xu1 wu2 = void-nothing) = nihilistic/nihilism.

Invalid 氣血兩虚 (qi4 xue3 liang3 xu1 = energy-blood-both-weak/deficient), feels 虚弱 (xu1 ruo4 = weak-strengthless), 虚脱 (xu1 tuo1 = weak-exhausted), has 虚汗 (xu1 han4 = weak-sweat = abnormal sweating due to debility), suspects cancer, but is 虚驚 (xu1 jing1 = false-alarm!)

Chinese physician defines 虚症 (xu1 zheng4 = weakness/deficiency-illnesses') symptoms: 陰虛發熱 (yin1 xu1 fa1 ri4 = yin-principle-weak-generates-fever), 陽虛怕冷 (yang2 xu1 pa4 leng3 = yang-principle-weak-fears-cold).

by Diana Yue