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 king planning revenge

薪 (radical艹 = 草, cao3, grass) means firewood. 薪金 (xin1 jin1 = firewood-gold/money) = 薪水 (xin1 shui3 = firewood-water) = salary. Employees get 月薪 (yue4 xzin1 = monthly-salary), want 加薪 (jia1 xin1 = add-wages/salary = raise).

吴 (Wu2, today’s 浙江 Zhe2 Jiang1 Province), 越 (Yue4, today’s 江蘇 Jiang1 Su1 Province) developed 文明 (wen2 ming2 = language-bright/enlightenment = culture) which 薪火相傳 (xin1 huo3 xiang1 chuan2 = firewood-fire/torch-mutual-transfer = was passed down the ages).

Wu invaded Yüe, 滅 (mie4, extinguished/wiped out) Yüe. Yüe’s king became 亡國奴 (wang2 guo2 nu2 = die-country-slave = enslaved/oppressed subject of conquered state), 臥薪嘗膽 (wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3 = slept-on-firewood-tasted-gall-bladder = used self-torture to shame himself, stimulate will to revenge).

by Diana Yue