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 moon goddess

丹
Putonghua pronunciation: dan1
Cantonese pronunciation: daan1
Meanings: medicinal pill, red

丹, 朱 (zhu1) both mean vivid red color. 丹砂 (dan1 sha1 = 朱砂) = red-grain) = red pigment made from cinnabar. 丹青 (dan1 qing1 = red-blue/green colors) means art/skill of painting. Patriot 一片丹心 (yi1 pian4 dan1 xin1 = one-piece-red-heart = is fervently loyal). But terms 丹田 (dan1 tian2 = red-field = diaphragm) and 牡丹 (mu3 dan1 = male-red = peony) do not mean red in any way.

丹 also means pill. 营丹妙藥 (ling2 dan1 miao4 yao4 = magical-pill-wonderful-medicine/elixir) = panacea. Emperor wants 仙丹 (xian1 dan1 = fairy/magic-pill = pill which can make eater immortal), orders Taoist priest to 煉丹 (lian4 dan1 = distil/concoct-pill = heat chemicals in burner to concoct pills).

by Diana Yue