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

Putonghua pronunciation: yin1
Cantonese pronunciation: yam1
Meanings: Yin, moon, female, dark, shadowy, ghostly

Taosim's 日 (ni4, sun) means 太陽 (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-masculinity), 月 (yue4, moon) means 太陰 (tai4 yin1 = ultimate-femininity). 陰暦 (yin1 li4 = moon-calendar) = lunar calendar.

Philosophical term 陰陽 (yin1 yang2 = Yin-Yang) denotes opposite principles/forces: 男女 (nan2 nü3 = male-female/man-woman), 剛柔 (gang1 rou2 = hard/strong-soft/gentle), 明暗 (ming2 an4 = bright/open-dark/secretive). 陰毛 (yin1 mao2 = Yin-hair) = pubic hair. 陰盛陽衰 (yin1 sheng4 yang2 shuai1 = Yin-prosper-Yang-Decline) describes party/population with many women and few men. Body's 陰陽失調 (yin1 yang2 shi1 tiao2 = Yin-Yang-lose-harmony) = hormone/sexual imbalance.

陰 = dark/evil: 陰影 (yin1 ying3 = dark-shadow), 陰謀 (yin1 mou2 = dark/evil-plot), 陰森 (yin1 sen1 = dark-eerie). 陰間 (yin1 jian1 = dark-area) = hell.

by Diana Yue