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

寒 Putonghua pronunciation: han2
Cantonese pronunciation: hon4
Meanings: cold, chilly, humble, poor

寒 = 寒冷 (han2 leng3 = chilly-cold). 寒冬 (han2 dong1 = cold-winter), 寒衣 (han2 yī = cold-clothes = winter clothes) can 寒情緖 (yū4 han2 = resist-cold). 寒假 (han2 jiā4 = cold-holiday) = winter vacation. Ghost story makes listener 不寒而慄 (bu4 han2 ēr2 lü4 = not-feeling-cold-yet-tremble).

寒 = poor/humble/cheap. 寒喧 (han2 xūan1 = cold-make-noise) means chat superficially. 寒窗苦讀 (han2 chuāng1 kǔ3 du2 = cold-window-bitter/hard-read/study) describes poorly-financed student studying persistently. 寒酸 (han2 suān1 = cold-sour) = cheaply attired/mannered.

Chinese myth says beautiful lady 嫦娥 (Cháng2 E2) stole, swallowed 灵藥 (líng2 yào4 = magical-medicine) and 奔月 (bèn1 yuè4 = ran/escaped-to-the-moon), now lives in 廣寒宮 (guāng3 han2 gōng1 = expansive-cold-palace = Moon Palace).

by Diana Yue