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 the 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 the myth of the ten suns

Putonghua pronunciation: ri4
Cantonese pronunciation: yat6
Meanings: sun, day

神話 (shen2 hua4 = god-talk = myths) describe 神 (shen2, gods/goddesses). In 中國神話 (Zhong1 Guo2 shen2 hua4 = Middle-Kingdom god-talk = Chinese mythology), 東方天神 (dong1 fang1 tian1 shen2 = east-direction-sky-god = God of Eastern Heavens) had ten sons, each a 日 (ri4 = 太陽 tai4 yang2 = ultimate-yang = sun) with a 鳥 (niao3, bird) in the center.

每日 (mei3 ri4= each-sun/day = everyday) one sun appears to 萬物 (wan4 wu4 = ten-thousand-things = all the world), 發光 (fa1 guang1 = emits-light) 發熱 (fa1 re4 = emits-heat/warmth).

People lived happily, 日出而作 (ri4 chu1 er2 zuo4 = sun-out-and-work = work at sunrise), 日入而息 (ri4 ru4 er2 xi1 = sun-in-and-rest = rest at sundown).

by Diana Yue