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 the myth of the ten suns**

**Putonghua pronunciation:** shi2  
**Cantonese pronunciation:** sap6  
**Meanings:** ten

When 堯 (Yao2) was king, all ten suns appeared together: 一 (yi1, one), 二 (er4, two), 三 (san1, three), 四 (si4, four), 五 (wu3, five), 六 (liu4, six), 七 (qi1, seven), 八 (ba1, eight), 九 (jiu3, nine), 十 (shi2, ten)! This caused 大旱災 (da4 han4 zai1 = big~dry-disaster = big drought).

草木 (cao3 mu4 = grass~wood/tree = plants) 稻穀 (dao4 gu3 = rice-plant-grain = crops) 枯死 (ku1 si3 = dry-wither-die). 人類 (ren2 lei4 = man~kind = people) 鳥獸 (niao3 shou4 = birds~beasts) 餓死 (e4 si3 = starve-to-death).

The situation was 十分危急 (shi2 fen1 wei1 ji2 = ten-points-dangerous-urgent = extremely dangerous/precipitous), the people were 十分困難 (shi2 fen1 kun4 nan2 = ten-points-confined-difficult = in extreme difficulty).

by Diana Yue