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

焦
Putonghua pronunciation: jiao1
Cantonese pronunciation: jiu1
Meanings: parched, scorched, charred

Character 焦 has radical 火 (= 火 huo3, fire). 十日并出 (shi2 ri4 bing4 chu1 = ten-suns-together-out/shining) heated 大氣層 (da4 qi4 ceng2 = big-air/gas-layer = the atmosphere), 燒焦 (shao1 jiao1 = burnt-charred) 土地 (tu3 di4 = soil-land = the land). Wood/bodies became 焦炭 (jiao1 tan4 = burnt-charcoal).

In 旱灾 (han4 zai1 = dry-disaster = drought), 饥荒 (jil1 huang1 = hunger-waste = famine), people 心焦 (xin1 jiao1 = heart-scorched = felt anxious/desperate), begged for help until 唇焦舌爛 (chun2 jiao1 she2 lan4 = lips-parched-tongue-scathed).

Officials 焦頭爛額 (jiao1 tou2 lan4 e2 = scorched-head-broken-forehead = were totally defeated).

Archer 后羿 (Hou4 Yi4 = Hou-yi) became 焦點 (jiao1 dian3 = scorched-spot = focus) of everyone’s attention.

by Diana Yue