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

射

Putonghua pronunciation: she4
Cantonese pronunciation: se6
Meanings: shoot, archery

弓 (gong1, bow), 箭 (jian4, arrow), 刀 (dao1, broad-blade knife), 槍 (qiang1, sharp-headed rod), 剣 (jian4, sword), 戟 (ji1, lance with vertical-horizontal-bladed-head), 矛 (mao2, spear), 盾 (dun4, shield) are weapons.

后羿 (Hou4 Yi4 = Hou-yi) 箭無虛發 (jian4 wu2 xu1 fa1 = arrow-no-empty-release = arrow never misses), 百發百中 (bai2 fa1 bai2 zhong4 = hundred-releases-hundred-hits = always hits mark), aimed at one sun, 一射中的 (yi1 she4 zhong4 di2 = one-shoot-hits-mark). Noun 的 (di4 = 目的 mu4 di4 = eyes’ target/aim/objective).

He 射下 (she4 xia4 = shot-down) nine suns, 射殺 (she4 sha1 = shot-killed) harmful snakes/beasts. People hailed him: 神射手! (shen2 she4 shou3 = god-shoot-hand = godlike/wonderful archer!) Today 射擊 (she4 ji1 = shoot-attack) means gun/rifle-shooting.