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

留
Putonghua pronunciation: liu2
Cantonese pronunciation: lau4
Meanings: leave, remain, keep, retain

留 = stay/keep, not depart/expel: 留宿 (liu2 su4 = stay-the-night), 留學 (liu2 xue2 = stay-study = study abroad).

羿射九日 (Yi4 she4 jiu3 ri4 = Hou-yi-shot-down-nine-suns). 第十個太陽 (di4 shi2 ge4 tai4 yang2 = number-ten-unit-ultimate-yang = the tenth sun) yelled: 手下留情! (shou3 xia4 liu2 qing2 = hand-under-keep-feeling/kindness = Restrain your blow, don’t hit/shoot/kill me!)

Hou-yi 留有餘地 (liu2 you3 yu2 di4 = retain-has-remain-land = left room for manoeuvre/negotiation), 留下 (liu2 xia4 = leave-down = kept) one sun, warns him: 留意! (liu2 yi4 = keep-notion = attention!) 留在天下 (liu2 zai4 tian1 shang4 = stay-in-sky-above), 為人民服務 (wei4 ren2 ren2 min2 fu2 wu4 = for-human-people-serve-chores = serve the people!)

by Diana Yue