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 flooding

Putonghua pronunciation: zhu4
Cantonese pronunciation: jue3
Meanings: pour, inject

注 (radical = 水 shui3, water) means squirting/streaming of liquid. Maid 注水 (zhu4 shui3 = pours-water) into bottle. Patient receives 注射 (zhu4 she4 = pour-shoot = injection). Investors 注入資金 (zhu4 ru4 zhi1 jin1 = pour-in-capital-gold = put in money), 注重 (zhu4 zhong4 = pour-important = attach importance to) company’s performance.

Economists 注意 (zhu4 yi4 = pour/concentrate-idea = pay notice/attention to) economic slow-down, 關注 (guan1 zhu4 = care-concentrate = are concerned about/watch) unemployment.

血流如注 (xue3 liu2 ru2 zhu4 = blood-flow-resemble-pour) describes gushing wound. After 大雨如注 (da4 yu3 ru2 zhu4 = big-rain-resemble-pour = heavy downpour), flood water 流注 (liu2 zhu4 = flow-pour) into aqueducts, 灌注 (guan4 zhu4 = fill-pour = irrigate) farmland.