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

塩
Putonghua pronunciation: ba4
Cantonese pronunciation: ba3
Meanings: dam

Character 壩 = 土 (tu3, earth) + 霸 (ba4, strong power/bully). 霸王 (ba4 wang2 = bully-king) = domineering ruler/bully. 霸權 (ba4 quan2 = bully-power) = hegemony. 壩 stands across river canyons/gorges, harnesses river’s 水力 (shui3 li4 = water-power).

China’s 三峡大坝 (san1 xia3 da4 ba4 = Three-Gorges-big-dam = the Three Gorges Dam) stands astride 長江三峽 (Chang2 Jiang2 San1 Xia3 = Long-River-three-gorges the Yangtze Gorges) at 重慶 (Chong2 Qing2 = Chongqing).

When upstream’s 洪水 (hong2 shui3 = flood-water = floods/deluge) arrive at Chongqing, 洪峰 (hong2 feng1 = flood-peak) passes through 洩洪閘 (xie4 hong2 zha2 = discharge-flood-gates = flood-gates), 流量 (liu2 liang4 = water-flow-volume) is controlled. 水庫 (shui3 ku4 = water-storage = reservoirs) capture flood water.

by Diana Yue