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

治 (radical .setRequestHeader = water shui3, water) originally means治水 (zhi4 shui3 = controlling-water/floods). 辨水利 (ban4 shui3 li4 = do-water-benefit) means constructing irrigation projects.

During 雨灾 (yu3 zai1 = rain-disaster = flooding caused by rain), 堤壩 (di1 ba4 = dikes/levees-dams) hold water back, 水道 (shui3 dao4 = water-channels) 疏導 (shu1 dao3 = thin/spread-direct = diverge/re-direct) flood water into 河 (he2, rivers), 湖 (hu2, lakes), 池 (chi2, ponds), 水庫 (shui3 ku4 = water-store = reservoirs).


by Diana Yue