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 nuclear leakage

核 (radical 木 mu4, wood) = hard/dense center: fruit/nut’s 果核 (guo3 he2 = fruit-pit/stone), group’s 核心 (he2 xin1 = pit/stone-heart = core). In matter, 分子 (fen4 zi0 = separate-diminutive = molecules) comprise 原子 (yuan2 zi0 = origin-diminutive = atoms) having 核子 (he2 zi0 = core-diminutive = nucleus/nuclei).

核反應堆 (he2 fan3 ying44 dui1 = nuclear-reverse-response-pile = nuclear reactor) performs 核裂變 (he2 lie4 bian4 = nuclear-break-change = nuclear fission). 核反應 (he2 fan3 ying4 = nuclear-reverse-response = nuclear reaction) generates 熱 (re4, heat), 核能 (he2 neng2 = nuclear-power/energy), 電能 (dian4 neng2 = electric-power/energy).

核潜艇 (he2 qian2 ting3 = nuclear-dive-boat = nuclear submarines) are nuclear-powered. 核彈頭 (he2 dan4 tou2 = nuclear-bomb-heads) = nuclear warheads.

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