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 \ 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 water

水 (shui3)
Cantonese pronunciation: sui2
Meanings: water, liquid, fluid

水 (= radicals 氵,氠,雨) forms 海 (hai3, sea), 雲 (yun2, clouds), facilitates 洗 (xi3, washing), 蒸 (zheng1, steaming). Interaction of 水木火土金 (shui3 mu4 huo3 tu3 jin1 = water, wood, fire, earth, metal) forms Chinese philosophical concept 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-elements).

Nature demonstrates 金生水 (jin1 sheng1 shui3 = metal-engenders-water: metal contains water), 水生木 (shui3 sheng1 mu4 = water-engenders-wood: nourishes plants). So, gardeners 澆花 (xiao1 hua1 = waters-flowers).

土剋水 (tu3 ke1 shui3 = earth-suppresses/absorbs-water), 水剋火 (shui3 ke1 huo3 = water-suppresses/extinguishes water). So, 兵來將擋, 水來土掩 (bing1 lai2 jiang4 dang3, shui3 lai2 tu3 yan3 = soldiers-come-knight-stops-them, water-comes-earth-covers-it): When enemy/calamity strikes, just fight it!

by Diana Yue