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

Putonghua pronunciation: chang3
Cantonese pronunciation: chong2
Meanings: factory

廠 (= 工廠 chang1 chang3 = work-factory) hires 縣長 (chang3 zhang3 = factory-chief = factory director), 工人 (gong1 ren2 = work-ers). 製衣廠 (zhi4 yi1 chang3 = make-clothes-factory) = garments factory. 船廠 (zao4 chuan2 hccang3 = make-ship-factory) = shipbuilding factory.

Japan’s 東京電力公司 (dong1 jing1 dian4 li4 gong1 si1 = east-capital-electric-power-public-bureau = Tokyo Electric Power Company = TEPCO) operates 核電廠 (he2 dian4 chang3 = nuclear-electric-factory = nuclear-power-plants).

Nuclear plants’ 廠房 (chang3 fang2 = factory-room = factory buildings) house 核反應堆 (he2 fan3 ying4 du1 = nuclear-reverse-response-pile = nuclear reactors), use 鈾 (you3, uranium), 鈾 (bu4, plutonium) as 核燃料 (he2 ran2 liao4 = nuclear-burn-material = nuclear fuel) to 發電 (fa1 dian4 = generate-electricity).

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