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 water

Putonghua pronunciation: gang1
Cantonese pronunciation: gong1
Meanings: strong

水 forms 浪 (lang4, waves), 潮 (chao2, tides), 急流 (ji2 liu2 = fast-flowing-currents/rapids), 瀑布 (pu2 bu4 = tumbling-water-cloth = waterfalls).

Water is 陽剛 (yang2 gang1 = yang-force-masculine = hard/strong). 冰川 (bing1 chuan1 = ice-river = glaciers) cut through mountains. 水壩 (shui3 ba4 = water-dams) harness 河水 (he2 shui3 = river-water) for 水力發電 (shui3 li4 fa1 dian4 = water-power-generate-electricity = hydro-electric power), 水庫 (shui3 ku4 = water-vault = reservoirs). 蒸氣 (zheng1 qi4 = steam-vapor) drives 蒸氣機 (zheng1 qi4 ji1 = steam-engines).

Sage warns: 水能載舟, 也能覆舟 (shui3 neng2 zai4 zhao1, ye3 neng2 fu4 zhao1 = water-can-carry-boat, also-can-overturn-boat: The same power can help you but can also turn around and destroy you!)

by Diana Yue