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


春光乍泄 (chun1 guang1 zha4 xie3 = spring-light-sudden-leak) describes unintended exposure of woman’s under-parts or couple having sex. Men are frustrated by 泄精 (xie3 jing1 = leak-sperm/semen), 早泄 (zao3 xie3 = early-leak = premature ejaculation).

Wikileaks 泄密 (xie3 mi4 = leak-secrets). 核泄漏 (he2 xie3 lou4 = nuclear-leak-drop) = nuclear leakage.

by Diana Yue