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

柔
Putonghua pronunciation: rou2
Cantonese pronunciation: yau4
Meanings: gentle, flexible, mild, soft, supple, yielding

水 (= radicals \, \, \, \, \, 雨) forms 雨 (yù3, rain), 露 (lu4, dew), 滋潤萬物 (zi1 run4 wan4 wu4 = nourish-wet-ten-thousand-things = brings life/enrichment to all). 柔情似水 (rou2 qing2 si4 shui3 = gentle-love-resemble-water) describes woman’s tolerant care/love.

Water is 隤柔 (yìn1 rou2 = yin-force-feminine = soft/gentle). Taiji-boxing/kungfu 以柔制剛 (yi3 rou2 zhi4 gang1 = use-gentleness-overcome-strong-force = dissolves-suppresses powerful blows with gentle movements).

Water can 柔調 (rou2 tiao2 = gently-heal/soothen) wounds/conflicts. 老子 (Lào3 zi3, Daoist philosopher) said: 水善利萬物而不爭 (shuì3 shàn4 li4 wan4 wu4 er2 bu4 zhēng1 = water-good-benefit-ten-thousand-things-and-not-compete/fight = water benefits everything without competing with them). Conclusion: 上善若水 (shàng4 shàn4 rou4 shuǐ3 = The-highest-good-is-like-water).

by Diana Yue