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.

This week: Words about earthquakes

川 (three vertical strokes symbolizing running water) = 河 (he) = river. 山川 (shan chuan = mountains-rivers) means geographic features. 川流不息 (chuan liu bu xi = river-flow-no-rest) describes continuous flow of people, traffic, commodities.

四川 (si chuan = four-rivers = Sichuan Province in western China), historically called 蜀 (shu), is a basin overrun by four rivers. Its capital is 成都 (cheng du = Chengdu). Its most famous wildlife is the大熊貓 (da xiong mao = big-bear-cat = giant panda).

川 is short for 四川: 川菜 (chuan cai = Sichuan-vegi = Sichuan cuisine), 川劇 (chuan ju = Sichuan-drama = Sichuan opera), 川藏公路 (chuan zang gong lu = Sichuan-Xizang-public-road = Sichuan-Tibetan Highway).

by Diana Yue