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

Pronunciation: zhen (Putonghua, 4th tone), jan (Cantonese 3rd tone)
Basic meaning: shake, vibrate, quiver, quake, shock

地震 (di zhen = land/earth-shocks/quakes) and 海嘯 (hai xiao = sea-whistle/howl = tsunamis) are 天災 (tian zai = heaven/natural-disasters).

The 四川大地震 (si chuan da di zhen = Sichuan-big-earthquake) of 12 May 2008 killed over 四萬人 (si wan ren = four-ten-thousand-people). The force was 八級 (ba ji = eight/8th-grade) on the 聲克氏 (li ke te zhi = “Richter”-transliterated-system = Richter scale). There were many 餘震 (yu zhen = remaining-quakes = aftershocks).

震耳 (zhen er = shake-ears) describes a deafening sound. 震驚 (zhen jing = shocked-alarmed) means feeling shocked. 腦震蕩 (nao zhen dang = brain-shake-sway) means brain shock (Chinese transliteration of “shock” is “休克” = xiu ke = “sho”~“ck”).

by Diana Yue