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

災 (水 = water + 火 huo = fire) contains disaster-inflicting elements. 水災 (shui zai = water-disaster = floods), 火災 (huo zai = fire-disaster = fires) cause 災難 (zai nan = disaster-sufferings = catastrophes).

Earthquakes are 自然災害 (zi ran zai hai = self/automatic-so-disaster-harm) = natural disasters. 抗災 (kang zai = resist-disaster) means rescue work in 災區 (zai qu = disaster-region = areas affected) to help 災民 (zai min = disaster-people = victims).

天災人禍 (tian zai ren huo = heaven/natural-disaster-people-calamity) laments natural disasters (unavoidable) and calamities caused by human errors/folly (deplorable). 破財擋災 (po cai dang zai = break-money-resist-disaster) consoles someone who has paid/lost money and escaped 災劫 (zai jie = disaster-Sanskrit-“kalpa” = injury/destruction).

Pronunciation: zai (Putonghua, 1st tone), joi (Cantonese 1st tone)
Basic meaning: disaster

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