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

濟
Putonghua pronunciation: ji4 Cantonese pronunciation: jai3
Meanings: cross river, aid, help, relief, achieve, effective

Water (= H₂O: 氫 qing1, hydrogen + 氧 yang3, oxygen) sustains life. 濟 (radical 氵 = 水 shui3 + 齊 qi2, together) means regulating/crossing water or effectively distributing help, e.g. 濟貧 (ji4 pin2 = giving-aid-to-the-poor).

同舟共濟 (tong2 zhou1 gong4 ji4 = same-boat-together-cross/help) describes ill-fated people helping each other. 共濟會 (gong4 ji4 hui4 = together-help-society) is the Masonic Society's Chinese name.

Indeed, 流水不腐, 户樞不蠹 (liu2 shui3 bu4 fu3, hu4 shui1 bu2 du4 = flowing-water-doesn’t-go-bad, door’s-hinge-doesn’t-get-eaten-by-worms): remaining active puts off things’ decay/crumbling. But if 經濟 (jing1 ji4 = plan-distribute-help = the economy) is 不濟 (bu4 ji4 = not-effective = weak), job-hunting is 無濟於事 (wu2 ji4 yu1 shi4 = no-help-to-issue = useless).

by Diana Yue