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: $1 = \text{diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged}$

2nd tone: $2 = \text{diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high}$

3rd tone: $3 = \text{diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high}$

4th tone: $4 = \text{diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest}$

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 The Water Margin

Putonghua pronunciation: yǔ3
Cantonese pronunciation: yue5
Meanings: rain

雨, meaning rain, is radical in 雲 (yūn2, cloud), 霧 (wu4, mist/fog), 雪 (xüe3, snow). 下雨 (xia4 yǔ3 = down/fall-rain) = to rain. 雷雨 (lei2 yǔ3 = thunder-rain) = thunderstorm. 和風細雨 (he2 feng1 xi4 yǔ3 = mild-wind-small-rain) = breezy, drizzly. 傾盤大雨 (qing1 pan2 da4 yǔ3 = pour-pot-big-rain) = pouring rain.

Cautious people 未雨籌謀 (wei4 yǔ3 chou2 mou2 = not-yet-rain-arrange-plan = plan way ahead). Poetic landscape description 空山靈雨 (kong1 shan1 ling2 yǔ3 = empty-mountain-soul-stirring-rain) also describes words bringing spiritual awakening.

In The Water Margin, 宋江 (Song4 Jiang1), leader of the 108 bandits, was called 及時雨 (ji2 shi2 yǔ3 = reach-time-rain = timely rain) because he gave generous, timely help to many people.

by Diana Yue