Character Builder

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 Revolution of 1911

流 流 (radical氵 = water shui3, water) means current: 水流 (shui3 liu2 = water-current), 氣流 (qi4 liu2 = air-current), 潮流 (chao2 liu2 = tide-current = trend). 川流不息 (chuan1 liu2 bu4 xi1 = river-flows-un-ending) describes river or busy traffic. 流浪 (liu2 lang4 = drift-wave) = wander/roam.

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三教九流 (san1 jiao4 jiu3 liu2 = three-religions-nine-levels/types) = men of mixed/questionable background/professions. 一流 (yi1 liu2 = one/first-level) = first-rate/“Super!”/“Great!” expresses speaker’s satisfaction.

Verb 流 = flow/ooze/emit: 流淚 (liu2 lei4 = shed-tears), 流汗 (liu2 han4 = flow-sweat = sweat), 流血 (liu2 xue4 = flow-blood = bleed). Legends 流傳 (liu2 chuan2 = flow-pass-on = circulate). Heroes 流芳百世 (liu2 fang1 bai2 shi4 = flow-fragrance-hundred-generations = are praised for centuries).

by Diana Yue