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 humidity

濡 (radical氵 = water shui3 = water)
Putonghua pronunciation: shi1
Cantonese pronunciation: sap1
Meanings: wet, damp

Character 濡 has seven dots — a lot of water! Tropical regions are 多雨 (duo1 yu3 = much-rain = rainy). Plants thrive in 濡湿 (shi1 run4 = wet-nourish = damp/moist, growth-fostering) weather. Birds flock to 濕地公園 (shi1 di2 gong1 yuan2 = wet-land-public-garden = wetland natural parks).

Tear-jerker makes movie-goers 眼濕濡 (yan3 shi1 shi1 = eyes-wet-wet = tearful). In places with high 相對濕度 (xiang1 dui4 shi1 du4 = mutual-compare-damp-degree = relative humidity), 抽濕機 (chou1 shi1 ji1 = draw-out-moisture-machine = dehumidifiers) are essential.

濡 is a Chinese medicinal term. Rheumatism’s Chinese name is 風濕 (feng1 shi1 = wind-damp). Chinese medicine says 食療 (shi2 liao2 = eat-cure = food/diet therapy) can counter-balance body's 濕熱 (shi1 ri4 = damp-heat).

by Diana Yue