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 fishing

水
Putonghua pronunciation: shui 3
Cantonese pronunciation: sui 2
Meanings: water

水 (shuí = water-drops) is radical for 海 (hài, sea), 河 (hé, river), 湖 (hú, lake), 泉 (quán, spring), 溪 (xī, stream), 池 (chí, pond). 治水 (zhì shuǐ = govern/control-water) = control/eliminate flooding. Switzerland has beautiful 山水 (shān shuǐ = mountain-water = natural scenery).

Philosophers say “上善若水” (shàng shàn ruò shuǐ = the-highest-good-is-like-that-of-water). 水族 (shuǐ zú = water-tribe = water creatures e.g. fish, shrimps, crabs) thrive in 活水 (huó shuǐ = living-water), 流水 (liú shuǐ = flowing/running-water), not 死水 (sǐ shuǐ = dead/stagnant-water).

Friends/lovers enjoy each other’s presence 如魚得水 (rú yú dé shuǐ = like-fish-having/in-water). 水清無魚 (shuǐ qīng wú yú = water-clear/pure-has-no-fish) means clinically-clean or corruption-free environments cannot nurture robust activities/growth.

by Diana Yue