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 \ pitch: 2 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 the five elements

水
Putonghua pronunciation: shui3
Cantonese pronunciation: sui2
Meanings: water

Taoists say 陰陽 (yin1 yang2 = Yin-Yang, male-female complementary forces) and 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-movement = five elements interacting in nature) underlie all physical/ metaphysical existence. 五行 (water, fire, metal, wood, earth) 相生 (xiang1 sheng1 = mutually-generate), 相剋 (xiang1 ke4 = mutually-overcome) each other, e.g. 水生木 (shui3 sheng1 mu4 = water-nourishes-wood/trees), 水剋火 (shui3 ke4 huo3 = water-conquers-fire).

水 is everywhere: 雨水 (yu2 shui3 = rain-water), 井水 (jing2 shui3 = well-water), 露水 (lu4 shui3 = dew-water), 淚水 (lei4 shui3 = tear-water/drops). Fortune-tellers say 水為財 (shui3 wei2 cai2 = water-is/brings-money).

洪水猛獸 (hong2 shui3 meng3 shou4 = flood-water-fierce-beasts) means calamitous/destructive forces. 行雲流水 (xing2 yun2 liu2 shi3 = moving-clouds-flowing-water) describes flowing music.

by Diana Yue