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 the five elements

土

Putonghua pronunciation: tu3
Cantonese pronunciation: to2
Meanings: earth, soil, land, native

Radical 土 indicates land/earth: 地 (di4, land), 坡 (po1, slope), 塌 (ta1, collapse), 埋 (mai2, bury), 塵 (chen2, dust). 土生金 (tu3 sheng1 jin1 = earth-generates/yields-metals), 土剋水 (tu3 ke4 shui3 = earth-overcomes/buries-water) demonstrate 五行 (wu3 xing2 = five-elements) principles.

國土 (guo2 tu3 = nation's-land) = national territory. 土人 (tu3 ren2 = earth/native-person) = aborigines. Country's 風土 (feng1 tu3 = wind-earth = customs/characteristics) are rooted in country’s 土壤 (tu3 rang2 = land-earth = native environment). 土包 (tu3 bao1 = earth-bun) = bumpkin. China’s 洋土之爭 (yang2 tu3 zhi1 zheng1 = ocean/foreigner-native-'s'-quarrel) = 19th century intellectual debate on whether to westernize or keep age-old traditions/practices. 土士必爭 (cun4 tu2 bi1 zheng1 = inch-of-land-definitely-fight/claim) means absolutely uncompromising in battle/bargaining.

by Diana Yue