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 fish

水
Putonghua pronunciation: shui3
Cantonese pronunciation: sui2
Meanings: water, liquid, fluid

水 = water/liquid: 海水 (hai3 shui3 = sea-water), 雨水 (yu3 shui3 = rain-water), 淚水 (lei4 shui3 = tear-drops). Fish/crustaceans are 水族 (shui3 zu2 = water-tribes = aquatic creatures). Compatible partners 如魚得水 (ru2 yu2 de2 shui3 = resemble-fish-in/having-water). 魚水之歡 (yu2 shui3 zhi1 huan1 = fish-water-’s-joy) means amorous/sexual pleasure.

水不相容 (shui3 huo3 bu4 xiang1 rong2 = water-fire-cannot-mutually-tolerate) describes clashing personalities. 河水不犯井水 (he2 shui3 bu4 fan4 jing3 shui3 = river-water-won’t-invade-well-water) describes different entities keeping interests apart without mutual interference.

細水長流 (xi4 shui3 chang2 liu2 = small-water/stream-long/continual-flow) describes quiet, long-lasting feelings/relationship. 流水不腐 (liu2 shui3 bu4 fu4 = flowing-water-doesn’t-rot = Constantly-used skill/mind is always alive/energized) is ancient Chinese maxim.

by Diana Yue