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 flooding

江 Putonghua pronunciation: jiang1
Cantonese pronunciation: gong1
Meanings: big river

江 = river (he2 liu2 = river-flow) = river, e.g. China’s 黃河 (Huang2 He2 = Yellow-River), 長江 (Chang2 Jiang1 = Long-River, also called 揚子江 = Yang2 Zi3 Jiang1 = Yangtze Kiang), 珠江 (Zhu1 Jiang1 = Pearl-River).

江水 (jiang1 shui3 = river-water) carrying 汐泥 (yu1 ni2 = sludge/sediment-mud = silt) forms 三角洲 (san1 jiao3 zhou1 = three-corners-island/continent = river delta). 長三角 (Chang2 san1 jiao3 = Yangtze-three-corners = Yangtze Delta) and 珠三角 (Zhu1 san1 jiao3 = Pearl-three-corners = Pearl River Delta) are highly industrialized regions.

Heroes 打江山 (da3 jiang1 shan1 = fight-rivers-mountains = work/fight hard to establish nation/enterprise/influence). National anthem praises country’s 大好河山 (da4 hao3 he2 shan1 = great-good-rivers-mountains = beautiful terrain/domain).

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