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

湖

Putonghua pronunciation: hu2
Cantonese pronunciation: wu2
Meanings: lake

湖（=泊bo1, lake）’s 蓄水量（xu4 shui3 liang4 = store-water-volume）comes from rivers/rainfall. 天然湖（tian1 ran2 hu2 = heaven-formed-lake = natural lakes), 人工湖（ren2 gong1 hu2 = human-work-lake = artificial lakes）supply 湖水（hu2 shui3 = lake-water）for irrigation.

Tourists visit England’s 湖区（Hu2 Qu1 = Lake-District), China’s 西湖（Xi1 Hu2 = West-Lake）for 湖光山色（hu2 guang1 shan1 se1 = lakes’-light-hills’-color = light/color variations in hills-and-lakes scenery).


by Diana Yue