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 Moses crossing the Red Sea

海
Putonghua pronunciation: hai3
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi2
Meanings: sea, ocean, lake

海 (radical 氵= water shui3, water) = 海洋 (hai3 yang2 = sea-ocean). 海面 航海 (hang2 hai3 = sail-seas), 海葬 (hai3 zang4 = sea-bury = take sea burial). 海子 (hai3 zi0 = sea-minimutive) means湖 (hu2, inland sea/lake).

Europe has黑海 (hei1 hai3 = Black-Sea), 裡海 (li3 hai3 = inside-sea = Caspian Sea), 地中海 (di4 zhong1 hai3 = land-centre/inside-sea = Mediterranean Sea). 海军 (hai3 jün1 = sea-army) = navy. 海洋法 (hai3 yang2 fa3 = seas-oceans-law) = maritime law.

Led by摩西 (mo1 xi1 = “Moses”-transliterated), Israelites fled to红海 (hong2 hai3 = Red-Sea). 海水 (hai3 shui3 = sea-water) separated to let Israelites cross, then closed in, 淹死 (yan1 si3 = drown-die = drowned) Egyptians.

by Diana Yue