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.

This week: Words about Buddhism

乘

Pronunciation: cheng (Putonghua, 2nd tone), sing (Cantonese 4th tone)
Basic meaning: carriage, ride

The noun 乘 means transport vehicle (boat/carriage). In ancient China, a 千乘之家 (qian cheng zhi jia = thousand-carriages-possessing-family/clan) was a powerful vassal lord.

In Buddhist parables, 筏 (fa = raft) and 乘 (cheng = vehicle) symbolize Buddhism carrying mankind to salvation. Buddhism has two divisions: 小乘 (xiaocheng = small-carriage-Buddhism = Hinayana Buddhism), like a small carriage, is about attaining enlightenment for oneself (getting on to the carriage alone). 大乘 (da cheng = big-carriage-Buddhism = Mahayana Buddhism), like a big carriage, is about attaining enlightenment and helping others to attain it.

The verb 乘 means ride. 乘車 (cheng che) = ride/take car. 乘虛而入 (cheng xu er ri = ride/seize-chance-empty-and-enter) means taking advantage of someone’s weak moment to overpower him.

by Diana Yue