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 travelling

船 (radical 舟 zhou = boat) include 艇 (ting = rowboats), 艦 (jian = warships), 帆船 (fan chuan = sailing-ships), 貨船 (huo chuan = cargo-ships = container-vessels), 郵船 (you chuan = mail-ships = passenger-liners), 遊艇 (you ting = cruise-boats = yachts). Hongkong postcards show 艇舡 (shan ban = sampans), 龍舟 (long zhou = dragon-boats).

Ships 航行 (hang xing = sail-move) with 船長 (chuan zhang = ship-leader = captain), 舵手 (duo shou = helm-hand = helmsman), 船員 (chuan yuan = ship-members = crew), 水手 (shui shou = water-hands = sailors). 船王 (chuan wang = ship-kings) means shipping magnates.

“船堅炮利” (chuan jian pao li = ships-strong-canons-sharp) describes Japanese/western navies threatening China in the 1800’s.

by Diana Yue