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 Victoria Harbour

岸
Cantonese pronunciation: ngon6 Meanings: shore

Putonghua pronunciation: an4

海岸 (hai3 an4) = sea coast/shore. 天星小輪 (tian1 xing1 xiao3 lun2 = sky-star-little-wheel/machine-boat = the Star Ferry) sails between 維港兩岸 (wei2 gang3 liang3 an4 = Victoria-Harbour-two-shores). When it 泊岸 (bo2 an4 = park-shore), passengers 上岸 (shang4 an4 = up-shore = go onshore).

兩岸關係 (liang3 an4 guan1 x4i = two-shores/sides-relationship) = relationship/tension between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. 兩頭不到岸 (liang3 tou2 bu4 dao4 an4 = two- heads/ends-no-reach-shore/land) describes something that is neither here nor there.

Buddhists preach enlightenment/repentence: “苦海無邊, 回頭是岸” (ku3 hai3 wu2 bian1, hui2 tou2 sh4i an4 = bitterness/sufferings-sea-no-border/end, turn-head-is-shore/land) = human existence is endless suffering; turn back and you will find transcendence.

by Diana Yue