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

帆 (fan1)
Cantonese pronunciation: faan4
Meanings: sail, sailing boat

帆船 (fan1 chuan2 = sail-boat) range from 西班牙大帆船 (xi1 ban1 ya2 da4 fan1 chuan2 = “Spain”-transliterated-big-sail-boat = Spanish galleons) to Chinese 舢舨 (shan3 ban3 = sampans) in Victoria Harbour. 帆影 (fan1 ying3 = sails-shadows) means sailing boats, poetically speaking.

Jeans are made of 帆布 (fan1 bu4 = sail-cloth = denim). 帆船運動 (fan1 chuan2 yun4 dong4 = sail-boat-turn-move = sailing-sport) = yachting. 滑浪風帆 (hua2 lang4 feng1 fan1 = slide-wave-wind-sail) means wind-surfing. 青島 (Qing1 dao3) hosted the 2008 奧運會 (ao4 yun4 hui4 = Olympics-transliterated-sports-meet = Olympics) 帆船賽 (fan1 chuan2 sai4 = sail-boat-competitions = sailing events).

一帆風順 (yi1 fan1 feng1 shun4 = one-sail-wind-smooth) describes someone’s smooth road to success.

by Diana Yue