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 burning the linked ships

船
Cantonese pronunciation: suen4
Meanings: ship, boat, sea vessel

Old-type 船 (radical 舟 zhou1, boat/ship) has 舵手 (duo4 shou3 = helm-hand = helmsman), 船夫 (chuan2 fu1 = boat-men), 水手 (shui2 shou3 = water-hand = sailors), is rowed by 桨 (jiang3, oars).

上船 (shang4 chuan2 = up-ship) = embark. 沉船 (chen2 chuan2 = sink-ship) = shipwreck. 商船 (shang1 chuan2 = trading-vessels), 戰船 (zhao4 chuan2 = war-ships) form 船隊 (chuan2 dui4 = ship-team = fleets). 一腳踏兩船 (yi1 jiao3 ta4 liang3 chuan2 = one-foot-tread-two-boats) describes person dividing loyalty between two camps.

In ancient China’s 三國 (san1 guo2 = Three-Kingdoms) period (3rd century AD), 魏國 (Wei4 guo2 = Wei-Kingdom) built large 水師 (shui3 shi1 = water-army = navy) to invade 吳國 (Wu2 guo2 = Wu-Kingdom).

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