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 stupid search

舟
Cantonese pronunciation: jau1
Meanings: boat, skiff

Putonghua pronunciation: zhou1

舟 means 船 (chuan2, ship/boat). 舟子 (zhou1 zi3 = boat-son) = boatman. 舟車勞頓 (zhou1 jü1 lao2 dun4 = boat-car-labor-pause) = laborious/tiring travelling. 同舟共濟 (tong2 zhou1 gong4 ji4 = same-boat-together-irrigate) = similarly constrained, hence sharing resources.

一葉輕舟 (yi1 ye4 qing1 zhou1 = one-leaf-light-boat) = a light skiff. 月下泛舟 (yue4 xia4 fan4 zhou1 = moon-below-float/drift-boat) = leisurely boat-ride under moonlight. Chinese’ 賽龍舟 (sai4 long2 zhou1 = compete-dragon-boat) = Dragon Boat Race. Hebrews’ 挪亞方舟 (no2 ya3 fang1 zhou1 = “Noah”-transliterated-square-ship) = Noah’s Ark.

Public opinion is fickle/unreliable: 水能載舟亦能覆舟 (shui3 neng2 zai4 zhou1 yi4 neng2 fu4 zhou1 = water-can-carry-boat-also-can-overthrow-boat = it can make you or break you).

by Diana Yue