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 Dragon Boat Festival

沉
Putonghua pronunciation: chen2
Cantonese pronunciation: cham4
Meanings: sink, heavy, deep

沉 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) means sinking/sunken/heavy/deep: 沉重 (chen2 zhong4 = heavy~weighty) load/heart, 沉静 (chen2 jing4 = sink~quiet = quiet) character/mood, 沉痾 (chen2 ke1 = heavy/chronic illness).

Titanic 下沉 (xia4 chen2 = downward~sank), 沉没 (chen2 mo4 = sink~vanished). River-bed has 沉积物 (chen2 dian1 wu4 = sink~settled~object = sediments). 浮沉 (fu2 chen2 = floating~sinking) describes half-floating half-sinking object or person’s unstable circumstances/career.

Ancient poet 屈原 (Qū Yúán2), disliked by King, felt 消沉 (xiao1 chen2 = dissolve~sink = low/dejected), 抱石自沉 (bao4 zhi2 zi4 chen2 = embrace~rock~self~sink = holding rock, jumped into river, drowned himself). His poetry made readers 沉思 (chen2 si1 = sink/deep~think = think deeply), 沉醉 (chen2 zui4 = sink/deep~drunk = feel enchanted/intoxicated).

by Diana Yue