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

Putonghua pronunciation: shao1
Cantonese pronunciation: siu1
Meanings: burn

燒 (radical 火 huo3, fire) = burn/cook: 燒柴 (shao1 chai2 = burn-firewood), 燒飯 (shao1 fan4 = cook-rice). Soldiers use 燒器 (huo3 qi4 = fire-instrument = firearms).

呂 (Wu2) Kingdom’s general 周瑜 (Zhou1 Yu2) decided: 用火攻 (yong4 huo3 gong1 = use-fire-attack) = attack魏 (Wei4) Kingdom’s battleships with fire.

Wu archers lit, shot arrows obtained from 孔明借箭 (Kong3 Ming2 jie4 jian4 = Kong-ming borrowed arrows). 東風 (dong1 feng1 = east-wind) fanned fire. Wei’s 連環船 (lian2 huan2 chuan2 = linked-chained-ships) 燃燒 (ran2 shao4 = ignited-burned), 燒燬 (shao1 hui3 = burn-destroy = were burnt down). Wei’s soldiers 燒傷 (shao1 shang1 = burn-wound = were burnt, injured), 燒死 (shao1 si3 = burn-die = were burnt to death).

by Diana Yue