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

Putonghua pronunciation: she2
Cantonese pronunciation: se4
Meanings: snake

蛇 (radical 虫 chong2, insect/bug) symbolizes evil/wickedness.
Story 白蛇傳 (bai2 she2 zhuang4 = white-snake-legend) goes: 白蛇 (bai2 she2 = white-snake) and 青蛇 (qing1 she2 = bluish-green-snake) transformed themselves into humans, 迷惑 (mi2 huo4 = deceive-baffle = bewitched) young scholar 許仙 (Xu Xian1).

On fifth day of fifth lunar month, people drink 雄黃酒 (xiong2 huang2 ji3 = powdered-rhabiagar-wine) to exorcize 五毒 (wu3 du2 = five-poison = five venomous creatures: scorpions, snakes, lizards, centipedes, toads). 白娘娘 (bai2 niaang2 niaang2 = white-lady-lady = Madame White Snake) was condemned as 蛇蠍美人 (she2 xie1 mei3 ren2 = snake-scorpion-beauty-person = beautiful woman with wicked heart) and killed.
But story-readers were touched by 人蛇戀 (ren2 she2 lian4 = human-snake-love-story).

by Diana Yue