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

嘆
Putonghua pronunciation: tan4
Cantonese pronunciation: taan3
Meanings: sigh

嘆 = sigh: 讚嘆 (zhan4 qi4 = praise-sigh = sigh with admiration), 驚嘆 (jing1 tan4 = fear-sigh = sigh with astonishment/wonder).

Before 赤壁之戰 (Chi4 Bi4 zhi1 zhan4 = Red-Cliff~’s~Battle) on the Yangtze River, Wei Kingdom’s ruler 曹操 (Cao2 Cao1) 嘆息 (tan4 xi1 = sigh-breath = sighed) to soldiers: “對酒當歌 dui4 jiu3 dang1 ge1 = facing-wine-should-sing, 人生幾何 ren2 sheng1 ji3 he2 = man’s-life-how-much = Let’s drink and sing, how long does life last?”

三國 (san1 guo2 = the-Three-Kingdoms: Wei, Shu, Wu) became history. Poet 詠嘆 (yong3 tan4 = sing-sigh = wrote lamenting poem): “大江東去!” (da4 jiang1 dong1 qü4 = mighty-river-eastward-go = the Yangtze flowing eastward washed all heroes away!”

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