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

舟
Putonghua pronunciation: zhou1
Cantonese pronunciation: jau1
Meanings: boat

舟 is radical for 船 (chuan2, boat), 艇 (ting3, small dinghy), 艦 (jian4, big ship). 舟子 (zhou1 zì3) = boatman. 舟亦方舟 (Nuo2 Ya4 fang1 zhou1 = “Noah”-transliterated-square-boat) = Noah’s ark.

Angler on 一叶轻舟 (yi1 ye4 qing1 zhou1 = one-leaf-light-boat = a weightless little boat) is picturesque scene. 泛舟湖上 (fan4 zhou1 hu2 shang4 = loosen-boat-lake-on = rowing on the lake) is leisurely activity.

At 端午節 (duan1 wu3 jie2 = begin-noon-festival = fifth day of fifth lunar month) people 賽龍舟 (sai4 long2 zhou1 = compete-dragon-boat = hold dragon boat races). Teams 划艇 (hua1 ting3 = row-boats), 鳴鑼打鼓 (ming2 luo2 da3 gu3 = sound-gongs-beat-drums) lest fish disturb deceased poet 屈原 (Qū1 Yūān2)’s body.

by Diana Yue