

Character Builder

您好嗎？

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 islands and atolls

礁

Putonghua pronunciation: *jiao1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jiu1*

Meaning: rock, reef, atoll, shoal, sandbar, sandbank

礁 (radical 石 *shi2*, stone/roc/reef) means 礁石 (*jiao1 shi2* = reef-rock) in sea. 群島 (*qun2 dao3* = group-of-islands = archipelagos) consist of 島 (*dao3*, islands), 礁 (*jiao1*, reefs), 珊瑚島 (*shan1 hu2 dao3* = coral-islands), 環礁湖 (*huan2 jiao1 hu2* = ring-reef-lake/lagoon = atolls), 沙洲 (*sha1 zhou1* = sand-banks = shoals/sandbanks/cays/keys). Scuba-divers frequent 大堡礁 (*Da4 Bao3 Jiao1* = Great-Barrier-Reef, Australia).

In 南海 (*Nan2 Hai2* = South-Sea, aka 南中國海 = South-China-Sea)'s 南沙群島 (*Nan2 Sha1 Qun2 Dao3* = South-Atolls-Group-of-Islands = Nansha Islands, aka Spratly Islands), countries claim sovereignty over 島礁 (*dao3 jiao1* = islands-islets).

觸礁 (*chu4 jiao1* = touch-reef) describes ship hitting 暗礁 (*an4 jiao1* = dark-reef = hidden/submerged rock) or plan thwarted, stalled.

by Diana Yue