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 dolphins

海

Putonghua pronunciation: hai3
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi2
Meanings: sea, ocean

海 (radical 水 shui3, water) = 海洋 (hai3 yang2 = sea-ocean).
海疆 (hai3 jiang1 = sea-territory) = country's maritime territory.
海納百川 (hai3 na4 bai2 chuan1 = sea-accepts-hundred-rivers) describes great thinking embracing all views/knowledge.

In “老人與海” (lao3 ren2 yu3 hai3 = old-person-and-sea = The Old Man And The Sea), 海明威 (hai3 ming2 wei1 = “Hemingway”-transliterated) described 海景 (hai3 jing3 = sea-view = seascapes), 海鳥 (hai3 niao3 = sea-birds), 海豚 (hai3 tun2 = sea-pig = dolphins).

Many Chinese study/settle in 海外 (hai3 wai4 = oceans-beyond = abroad). Those who return to China are called “海歸” (hai3 gui1 = oceans-return, synonymous with “海龜” (hai3 gui1 = sea-turtle).

by Diana Yue