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**

**島**

Cantonese pronunciation: do2
Meanings: island

島 (originally 島 niao3, birds + 山 shan1, mountain, i.e. sea-locked hill where migrating birds stay) = 海島 (hai3 dao3 = sea-island = isle/island), 島嶼 (dao3 yu3 = island-islet). 礁 (jiao1, reefs), 珊瑚島 (shan1 hu2 dao3 = coral-island = atolls), 沙洲 (sha1 zhou1 = sand-island = cays/keys) are 小島 (xiao3 dao3 = small-islands).

島弧 (dao3 hu2 = island-arc) is 群島 (qun2 dao3 = group-of-islands = archipelago) spreading arc-shaped on 大陸架 (da4 lu4 jia4 = big-land-shelf = continental shelf). 火山島 (huo3 shan1 dao3 = fire-mountain-island) = volcanic island.

Myths say 孤島 (gu1 dao3 = single/isolated-island) is 仙島 (xian1 dao3 = fairy-island). 安全島 (an1 quan2 dao3 = safe-perfect-island) = safety island for pedestrians.

by Diana Yue