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

陸
Putonghua pronunciation: lu4
Cantonese pronunciation: luk6
Meanings: land, ground

陸 (radical 土 lu4 shows two 土 tu3, soil/earth heaped together) means 陸地 (lu4 di4 = continents-land): 陸上 (lu4 shang4 = land-above = on land), 登陸 (deng1 lu4 = go-on-land), 陸路 (lu4 lu4 = land-route).

Poet John Donne wrote: “No man is an island, ...each man is 大陸的一部份” (da4 lu4 de0 yi1 bu4 fen4 = big-land-'s-one-part-share = “a part of the main”). 英倫三島 (Ying1 Lun3 san3 dao3 = “England”-transliterated-three-islands = the British Isles) is part of 歐洲大陸 (Ou1 Zhou1 da4 lu4 = “Eu”-rope-transliterated-big-land = the European continent).

Hong Kong's tourism relies on 陸客 (lu4 ke4 = mainland-guests/travellers) from 中國大陸 (Zhong1 Guo2 da4 lu4 = middle-kingdom/country-big-land = Mainland China).

by Diana Yue