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

通
Putonghua pronunciation: tong1
Cantonese pronunciation: tung1
Meanings: pass, through, link, connect, unimpeded

通 (radical 舟 = 舟 zhou1, boat) means link/through/unimpeded. China-Taiwan’s 三通 (san1 tong1 = three-links) means 通郵 (tong1 you2 = link-up/permit-postal-exchange), 通商 (tong1 shang1 = link-up/permit-trading), 通航 (tong1 hang2 = link-up-sail/fly = permit-traffic).

Person who 想通 (xiang3 tong1 = think-through = realizes/grasps rationale) becomes 通情達理 (tong1 qing2 da2 li3 = through-feelings-reach-reason = sensible/understanding). Stupid people 不通 (bu4 tong1 = no-through = don’t make sense).

Chinese patrol ships 通過 (tong1 guo4 = pass-through) sea-passage to 釣魚台列島 (Diao4 Yu2 Tai2 lie4 dao3 = angling-fish-terrace-row-of-islands = the Diaoyūtai Islands). To 溝通 (gou1 tong1 = ditch-through = communicate) with China, Japan needs 通透 (tong1 tou4 = through-thorough = sensible/penetrative/thorough) understanding of China’s historical perspective.

by Diana Yue