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.

This week: Words about earthquakes

島 (dao) = island
Pronunciation: dao (Putonghua, 3rd tone), do (Cantonese 2nd tone)
Basic meaning: island

孤島 (gu dao = alone/lonely-island) = single island, 群島 (qun dao = group-islands) = archipelago.
Islanders are 島民 (dao min = island-people). The 蓬萊仙島 (Peng Lai xian dao = Penglai-fairy-island) in Chinese mythology is where immortals live.

Dutch colonizers called Taiwan “Formosa” (transliterated as “福摩薩” fu mo sa, meaning “美麗島” mei li dao = beautiful-island). The Chinese call Taiwan “寶島” (bao dao = treasure-island).

Hongkong’s outlying islands are 離島 (li dao = separate-islands). The Britain Isles is 英倫三島 (ying lun san dao = England-transliterated-three-islands).
New York’s Long Island is 長島 (chang dao = long-island). Pedestrian islands are 安全島 (an quan dao = safe-intact-islands = safety-islands).

by Diana Yue