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

艦
Putonghua pronunciation: jian4
Cantonese pronunciation: laam6
Meanings: military vessel, battleship

艦 (舟 zhou1, boat + 監 jian1, watch/monitor) means 戰艦 (zhan4 jian4 = war-battleship = warship). 巡洋艦 (xün2 yang2 jian4 = patrol-ocean-battleship) = cruiser. 驅逐艦 (qü1 zhu2 jian4 = chase-pursue-battleship) = destroyer. 艦隊 (jian4 dui4 = battleship-team) = fleet.

Britain defeated Spain’s 無敵艦隊 (wu2 di2 jian4 dui4 = no-enemy/rival- battleship-team = the Spanish Armada) in 1588, used 炮艦外交 (pao4 jian4 wai4 jiao1 = canon-battleship-external-relations = gunboat diplomacy) to take Hong Kong in 1841. US’s 第七艦隊 (di4 qi1 jian4 dui4 = number-seven- battleship-team = Seventh Fleet) watches Taiwan.

To patrol her 領海 (ling3 hai3 = taken/lead/rule-sea = territorial sea/waters), China needs 航空母艦 (hang2 kong1 mu3 jian4 = fly-sky-mother-battleship = carriers).

by Diana Yue