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

保 (Cantonese pronunciation: bo2)
Meanings: preserve, keep, guard, safeguard, protect, defend

保 (radical 亻 = ren2, person) originally showed parent hugging baby. Mother-hen 保护 (bao3 hu4 = keep-protect = protects) chicks. Heir 保存 (bao3 cun2 = keep-remain = preserves) heirloom. 保健 (bao3 jian4 = keep-healthy = health) program 保证 (bao3 zheng4 = safeguard-prove = guarantees) client 保持 (bao3 chi2 = preserve-hold = maintain) youthful looks.

Cars/houses need 保养 (bao3 yang3 = keep-feed = maintenance). 保安员 (bao3 an1 yu2an2 = keep-safety-member = security guards) patrol grounds. Travelers buy 保险 (bao3 xian3 = protect-risk = insurance) plans.

Students join 保钓运动 (bao3 diao4 yun4 dou4 dong4 = defend-Diao-act-move = Defend Diaoyutai Movement), shout slogan “保钓钓鱼台!” (bao3 wei4 diao4 yu2 tai2 = keep-defend-angling-fish-terrace = “Defend Diaoyutai!”

by Diana Yue