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 and atolls

Putonghua pronunciation: dao3
Cantonese pronunciation: do2
Meaning: island

島 (島 niao3, birds + 山 shan1, hill/mountain) means 海島 (hai3 dao3 = sea-island = isle/island), 島嶼 (dao3 yu3 = island-islet): 小島 (xiao3 dao3 = small-islands), 島嶼 (dao3 lian4 = island-chain), 群島 (qun2 dao3 = group-of-islands = archipelago). 火山島 (huo3 shan1 dao3 = fire-mountain-island) = volcanic island.

Myths say 孤島 (gu1 dao3 = single/isolated-island) is 仙島 (xian1 dao3 = fairy-island). Britain is 島國 (dao3 guo2 = island-countries), but poet John Donne says “人不是孤島” (ren2 bu4 shi4 gu1 dao3 = person-not-is-isolated-island = “No man is an island”).

安全島 (an1 quan2 dao3 = safe-perfect-island) = pedestrian island. Engineers build 人工島 (ren2 gong1 dao3 = person-work-island = artificial/man-made islands).