The basic unit of the Chinese language is the 象形 (zi), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zì 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 zì together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zì 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 zì 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: hang2
Cantonese pronunciation: hong4
Meaning: sail, voyage, journey, travel

航 (radical 舟 zhou1, boat) means 航行 (hang2 xing2 = sail-travel/move): 航海 (hang2 hai3 = sail-the-seas), 航空 (hang2 kong1 = sail-skies = aviation). 民航 (min2 hang2 = civil-aviation) companies run 航班 (hang2 ban1 = travel-shift = airflights).

航運 (hang2 yün4 = sail/voyage-transport) = shipping. 航隊 (hang2 dui4 = sailing-fleet) 擴航 (qi3 hang2 = starts-voyage), follows 航道 (hang2 dao4 = sailing-route) between 島礁 (dao3 jiao1 = islands-atolls). Dolphins 領航 (ling3 hang2 = guide-ships). Destroyers 護航 (hu4 hang2 = protect-ships) against pirates.

航天工業 (hang2 tian1 gong1 ye4 = travel-sky-work-profession) = aerospace industry. 北斗 (bei3 dou3 = BeiDou, Great Dipper) is China’s 衛星導航 (wei4 xing1 dao3 hang2 = protect-star-guide-voyage = satellite navigation) system.