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

界

Putonghua pronunciation: jie4
Cantonese pronunciation: gaai3
Meaning: limit, rim, border, frontier, territory, sector, demarcation

界 (radical 田 tian2, cultivated field) means 界線 (jie4 xian4 = limit-line = rim:border), 界限 (jie4 xian4 = border-limit). However, 世界 (shi4 jie4 = world-border) means world/global. 無國界醫生 (wu2 guo2 jie4 yi1 sheng1 = none-national-border-medicine-sir/doctors) = Médecins Sans Frontières.

工商界 (gong1 shang1 jie4 = industrial-commercial-sector) is social 界別 (jie4 bie2 = defined-sector). However, 陽界 (Yang2 jie4 = Yang/male-principle-sector) means the living, 陰界 (Yin1 jie4 = Yin/female-principle-sector) means the dead.

Taiwan (ROC) and China (PRC) unanimously 界定 (jie4 ding4 = border-determine = define) jurisdiction in South China Sea with many 島礁 (dao3 jiao1 = islands-atolls): 九段線 (jiu3 duan4 xian4 = nine-segment-line = Nine-dotted Line) is China’s legal 國界 (guo2 jie2 = national-border).

by Diana Yue