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 ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement)

台
Putonghua pronunciation: tai2
Cantonese pronunciation: toi4
Meanings: Platform, short for Taiwan

台灣 (Tai2 Wan1) is a 省 (sheng3, province) of China. Portuguese sailors called it “Ilha Formosa” (transliterated as 福摩薩 ful mo2 sa4), meaning 美麗鳥 (mei3 li4 dao3 = beautiful-lovely-island). Taiwan was colony of 荷蘭 (He2 Lan2 = “Holland”-transliterated) in 1624-1662 and 日本 (Ri4 Ben3, Japan’s kanji-name) in 1895-1945. In 1949中華民國 (Zhong1 Hua2 Min2 Guo2 = Middle-Flower-People-State = Republic of China, ROC), defeated by 中共 (Zhong1 Gong4 = Chinese-Communists) on the Mainland, retreated to Taiwan.

US-backed ruling party 國民黨 (guo2 min2 dang3 = State-People-Party = Chinese Republican Party = the Kuomintang/KMT) confronted People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 台海風雲 (tai2 hai3 feng1 yun2 = Taiwan~sea~winds~clouds = political storms/rows in the Taiwan Strait).

by Diana Yue