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 marine life

海
Putonghua pronunciation: hai3
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi2
Meanings: sea, ocean

海 breeds living things: 海上 (hai3 shang4 = sea-on = on sea) are sea-birds, 海裡 (hai3 li3 = sea-in = in sea) are fish, 海邊 (hai3 bian1 = sea-edge = along coasts) are seals, in 海底 (hai3 di3 = sea's-bottom), on 海床 (hai3 chuang4 = sea-bed), are anemones/corals. Mythological figure 海龍王 (hai3 long2 wang2 = Sea's-Dragon-King) rules all oceans.

China’s 領海 (ling2 hai3 = lead-sea = territorial sea) covers parts of 黃海 (Huang2 Hai3 = Yellow-Sea), 東海 (Dong1 Hai3 = east-sea = East China Sea), 南海 (Nan2 Hai3 = south-sea = South China Sea).

海流 (hai3 liu2 = ocean-currents) affect ocean’s 溫度 (wen1 du4 = warm-degree = temperatures), 生態 (sheng1 tai4 = life-conditions/relations = ecology).

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