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.

Chinese often transcribes sounds “mi”/“me”/“mei” in foreign names as 美. America is 亚美利加 (Ya Mei Li Jia = “America”-transliterated), shortened to 美洲 (Mei Zhou = 美-continent): 北美 (Bei Mei = North-America), 中美 (Zhong Mei = Central-America), 南美 (Nan Mei = South-America).

The Organization of American States (美洲國家組織, Mei Zhou guo jia zu zhi = American-continent-countries-organization) has 34 member-nations, including 美國 (Mei Guo = 美-state = the USA).

美金 (Mei jin = US-gold/money) is the American greenback. 美式英語 (Mei shi Ying yu = American-style-“English”-transliterated-language) = American English. 美諺 (Mei yan = American idiom) = Americanism. 美國夢 (Mei Guo meng = US-dream) is the American Dream.

This week: Words about the Cold War

Pronunciation: mei (Putonghua, 3rd tone), mei (Cantonese, 5th tone)
Basic meaning: beauty, beautiful, transliteration of “me” in “America”

by Diana Yue