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 England

獅
Putonghua pronunciation: shì
Cantonese pronunciation: sī
Meanings: lion

獅子 (shì zi0 = lion-diminutive = lion), 萬獸之王 (wan shou zhi1 wang2 = ten-thousand-beast-’s-king = king of beasts), symbolizes regality/bravery/ferocity. 雄獅 (xiōng2 shì1 = male-lion) rules pack of 母獅 (mu3 shì1 = mother/female-lions). Chinese martial artists perform 舞獅 (wu3 shì1 = dance-lion = lion dance) on festive occasions. Shaolin monks practice 獅吼功 (shì1 hou3 gōng1 = lion-roar-kung-fu). 河東獅吼 (he2 dong1 shì1 hou3 = river-east-lion-roars) describes fierce wife shouting at husband.

Ancient 波斯 (bo1 shì = “Persian”-transliterated) sculptures feature winged lions. England had 獅心王理查 (shì1 xīn1 wáng2 li3 chā2 = lion-heart-king-“Richard”-transliterated = Richard the Lionheart). “獅子銀行” (shì1 zi0 yìn2 háng2 = lion-diminutive-silver-hóng = lion bank) is HSBC’s nickname.

by Diana Yue