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

Putonghua pronunciation: wang2
Cantonese pronunciation: wong4
Meanings: king, royal

王 (wang2 guo2 = king-state = kingdom) is ruled by 王朝 (wang2 chao2 = king-dynasty = royal dynasty/house). 王國 (guo2 wang2 = state’s-king, whose wife is 王后 wang2 hou4 = king’s-queen), passes 王位 (wang2 wei4 = king’s/royal-seat = throne) to 王子 (wang2 zi3 = king’s-son = prince) or 公主 (gong1 zhu3 = duke’s-master = princess).

Currently, 英女王 (ying1 nu3 wang2 = England’s- woman-king = the Queen of England) Elizabeth II rules 聯合王國 (lian2 he2 wang2 guo2 = join-combine-king-state = the United Kingdom/UK).

王 also means top achiever: 棋王 (qi2 wang2 = chess-king/champion), 賭王 (du3 wang2 = gambling-king/tycoon). Pavarotti is 歌王 (ge1 wang2 = song-king). 王牌 (wang2 pai2 = king/ace-card) brands/stars draw best sales/box office.

by Diana Yue