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: sha1
Cantonese pronunciation: sa1
Meanings: First word in Shakespeare’s Chinese name

England under 伊利沙白一世 (yi1 li4 sha1 bo2 yi1 shi4 = “Elizabeth”-transliterated-one/first-generation = Elizabeth I) produced 莎士比亞 (sha1 shi4 bi3 ya4 = “Shakespeare”-transliterated).

莎劇 (sha1 ju2 = Shakespearean-drama) include 悲劇 (bei1 ju2 = sorrow-drama = tragedies), 喜劇 (xi3 ju2 = joy-drama = comedies), describe 署生相 (zhong4 sheng1 xiang4 = multiple-lives-images = different walks of life): Italian lover 羅密歐 (luo2 mi4 ou1 = “Romeo”-transliterated), Moorish general 奧塞羅 (ao4 sai4 luo2 = “Othello”-transliterated), Jewish merchant 夏洛克 (xia4 luo4 ke1 = “Shylock”-transliterated).

英聯邦 (ying1 lian2 bang1 = England-link-states = British Commonwealth) countries use 英語 (ying1 yu3 = English-language), promote 英國文學 (ying1 guo2 wen2 xue2 = England-state-writing-study = English literature).

by Diana Yue