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 capital cities

首 (shou3)
Cantonese pronunciation: sau2
Meanings: head, chief, first, head, leading

首 means first/leading/head. 首都 (shou3 dou1 = leading-capital) = capital city. 首要 (shou3 yao4 = first-important) = most important. 斬首 (zhan2 shou3 = chop-head) = decapitation of person’s 首級 (shou3 ji2 = head-class = head).

Enumeration/narrative begins with 首先 (shou3 xian1 = first-early = firstly... 首次 (shou3 ci4 = first-time), 首輪 (shou3 lun2 = first-round). Company has 首席執行官 (shou3 xi2 zhi2 xing2 guan1 = first-seat-handle-execute-official = chief executive officer = CEO).

首長 (shou3 zhang3 = head-elder) = state/region’s leaders: Nazis’ 元首 (yu2n2 shou3 = primary/highest-head/leader = Führer), Britain’s 首相 (shou3 xiang4 = Prime-Minister), Hong Kong’s 特首 (te4 shou3 = special-head = abbr. from “head of HK Special Administrative Region” = Chief Executive of HKSAR).

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