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

宮
Putonghua pronunciation: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: palace, temple, castrate

宮 = palace/temple: London’s 白金漢宮 (Bai2 Jin1 Han4 Gong1 = “Buckingham”-transliterated-Palace), Beijing’s 故宮 (gu4 gong1 = past-palace = imperial palace), Washington’s 白宮 (Bai2 Gong1 = white-palace = White House). Ruler receives courtiers in 宮廷 (gong1 ting2 = palace-court), 宮殿 (gong1 dian4 = palace-halls/rooms).

Beijing’s 雍和宮 (Yong1 He2 Gong1 = grand-harmony-temple) is a Lama temple. Chinese think Moon Goddess lives in 廣寒宮 (guang3 han2 gong1 = large-frigid-palace in the moon). 子宮 (zi3 gong1 = son/child’s-palace) = uterus.

宮女 (gong1 nü3 = palace-women = palace maids) serve king’s 後宮 (hou4 gong1 = rear-section-of-palace = harem). Verb 宮 means castrate. 宮人 (gong1 ren2 = palace-persons) = eunuchs. 宮刑 (gong1 xing2 = castrate-torture/punishment) removes convict’s penis.

by Diana Yue