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 \ 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

國
Putonghua pronunciation: guo2
Cantonese pronunciation: gwok3
Meanings: country, state, nation

Character 國 shows square □ enclosing 戈 (gel, spear/weapon). 國家 (guo2 jia1 = country-home) = country. Forefathers 立國 (li4 guo2 = stand/found-dynasty/state), 建都 (jian4 du1 = build-state-capital), establish 國會 (guo2 hui4 = national-assembly = parliament).

國民 (guo2 min2 = country-people = country’s nationals) have 愛國心 (ai4 guo2 xin1 = love-country-heart = patriotism), respect 國旗 (guo2 qi2 = national-flag), 國歌 (guo2 ge1 = national-song/anthem).

A century ago 中國 (Zhong1 Guo2 = middle-kingdom = China) almost 亡國 (wang2 guo2 = die-country = was conquered/destroyed/wiped out as a country). Now it is 經濟大國 (jing1 ji4 da4 guo2 = administer-irrigate-big-country = a big economic power). 國貨 (guo2 huo4 = own-country’s-goods = goods made in China) have worldwide market.

by Diana Yue