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 the Olympic Games

奥
Cantonese pronunciation: ao4
Meanings: deep, profound

奧 (originally meaning house’s niche/recess) now means deep/profound. 深奧 (shen1 ao4 = deep-profound = profound/cryptic) sutras hide 奧秘 (ao4 mi4 = deep-secrets), but intelligent scholar 盡窺堂奧 (jin4 kui1 tang2 ao4 = thoroughly-peep/see-hall-niche = penetrates the deepest meanings).

古希臘 (gu3 Xi1 La4 = ancient-“Greece”-transliterated) believed gods live on 奧林匹斯山 (Ao4 Lin2 Pi3 Si1 shan1 = “Olympus”-transliterated-hill/mountain = Mount Olympus). 倫敦 (Lun2 Dun2 = “London”-transliterated) hosts 2012 奧林匹克世運會 (Ao4 Lin2 Pi3 Ke1 shi4 yün4 hui4 = “Olympic”-transliterated-world-sports-meet = Olympic Games, abbr. 奧運會 Ao4 yün4 hui4 = Olympic-sports-meets).

運動員 (yün4 dong4 yün2 = move-act-member = athletes) compete. Commentators explain each sport’s 奧妙 (ao4 miao4 = deep-wonder = peculiar knack/skill).

by Diana Yue