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 Third World

三 (san 1)
Cantonese pronunciation: saam 1
Meanings: three, third

三角 (san jiao 13 = three-corners/angles) = triangle/triangular.
珠江三角洲 (Zhu Jiang san jiao zhou 11131 = Pearl-River-triangular-water-surrounded-land = Pearl River delta). 三位一体 (san wei yi ti 1413 = three-entities-one-body) describes Christianity’s Holy Trinity.

“三思!” (san si 11 = three-think) means “Think thrice/more before you commit/act!”
三毛 (San Mao 12 = Three-Hairs) = little beggar-boy in Adventures of San-mao, a popular 1940s cartoon series.

亞洲 (Ya zhou 31 = “A”-of-Asia-transliterated-continent), 非洲 (Fei zhou 11 = “f”-of-Africa-transliterated-continent), 拉丁美洲 (La Ding Mei zhou 1131 = “Latin”-transliterated-“me”-of-America-transliterated-continent) form acronym “亞非拉丁美洲” (Ya Fei La 311 = Asia-Africa-Latin-America), i.e. 第三世界 (di san shi jie 4144 = numerical-order-third-world-boundary = the Third World).

by Diana Yue