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 New York

街
Putonghua pronunciation: jie1
Cantonese pronunciation: gaai1
Meaning: street, avenue

街 (radical 行 xing2, walk) means 街道 (jie1 dao4 = street-way = street/avenue). City has 大街小巷 (da4 jie1 xiao4 xiang4 = big-streets-small-alleys = streets large and small), 林蔭大街 (lin2 yin4 da4 jie1 = tree-lined/shaded-big-streets = boulevards), 街燈 (jie1 deng1 = street-lamps) adorn 街區 (jie1 que1 = street-enclosed-district).

Housewives 上街 (shang4 jie1 = up-street = go out), meet 街坊 (jie1 fang1 = street-square = neighbors) in 街市 (jie1 shi4 = street-market), pick up 街談巷議 (jie1 tan2 xiang4 yi4 = street-talk-alley-discussion = street/public gossip).

London’s 舰隊街 (jian4 dui4 jie1 = Fleet-Street) is once home of Britain’s national press. Brand-name shops line New York’s 第五街 (di4 wu3 jie1 = number-five-street = Fifth Avenue).

by Diana Yue