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 BRIC

巴
Putonghua pronunciation: ba 1
Cantonese pronunciation: ba 1
Meanings: first character of “Brazil”-transliterated

巴西 (Ba Xi 11) is “Brazil” transliterated. South America’s A, B, C states are 阿根廷 (A Gen Ting 412 = “Argentina”-transliterated), Brazil, 智利 (Zhi Li 44 = “Chile”-transliterated).

Brazil was Portugal’s 殖民地 (zhi min di 224 = sow/multiply-people-land = colony). Brazilians speak 葡語 (Pu yu 23 = “Por”-of-“Portugal”-transliterated-language = Portuguese).

Brazil 資源豐富 (zi yuan feng fu 1214 = capital-source-thick-rich = is rich in natural resources), exports 木材 (mu cai 42 = wood-materials = timber), 矿材 (kuang cai 42 = mineral-materials), 農產品 (nong chan pin 223 = agricultural-produce), 咖啡 (ka fei 11 = “coffee”-transliterated). 比利 (Bi Li 34 = “Pele”-transliterated) comes from this 足球王國 (zu qiu wang guo 1222 = foot-ball-kingdom).

by Diana Yue