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 PIIGS

Putonghua pronunciation: pu2
Cantonese pronunciation: po4
Meanings: First word in Portugal’s Chinese name

Portugal’s Chinese name is 葡萄牙 (pu2 tao2 ya2). These three zi are chosen for their sounds, not their literal meaning “grapes-teeth”.

歐盟 (ou1 meng2 = “Eu”-transliterated-alliance) = short for 歐洲聯盟 (ou1 zhou1 lian2 meng2 = “Eu”-continent-united-alliance = European Union). PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain) are countries in 歐盟 (ou1 zhou1 lian2 meng2 = “Eu”-transliterated-region = Eurozone). PIIGS’ Chinese translation is “歐豬五國” (ou1 zhu1 wu3 guo2 = Europe-pigs-five-states).

Portugal’s 国債 (guo2 zai4 = nationl-debts) and 政府赤字 (zheng4 fu3 chi4 zhi4 = administration-bureau-red-words = government deficits) soared during 2007-10’s global 金融海嘯 (jin1 rong2 hai3 xiao1 = gold-merge-sea-sough = financial tsunami). Is 破產 (po4 chan3 = break-assets = going bankrupt) inevitable?

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