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: yi4
Cantonese pronunciation: yi3
Meanings: First word in Italy’s Chinese name

古羅馬 (gu3 luo2 ma3 = ancient-“Roma”-transliterated) 建帝國 (di4 guo2 = emperor-state = empire), 培養了基督教 (ji1 du2 jiao4 = “Christus”-transliterated-religion = Christianity), 文藝復興 (wen2 yi4 fu4 xing1 = literature-arts-again-propser = the Renaissance). Modern Italy has 重工業 (zhong4 gong1 ye4 = heavy-work-trade = heavy industries),時裝業 (shi2 zhuang1 ye4 = time-costume-industry = fashion industries), 旅遊業 (lú3 you2 ye4 = travel-tour-industry = tourist industry).

經濟衰退 (jing1 ji4 shuai1 tui4 = planning-irrigation-decline-recede = economic recession) reminds Italians of 二战后 (er4 zhan4 hou4 = two/second-war-after = post-WWII) hardship days.