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 zis 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

Putonghua pronunciation: zhong 1
Cantonese pronunciation: jung 1
Meanings: middle, central, balanced; first character of “India”-transliterated

中國 (Zhong Guo 12 = Middle-Kingdom/Country) is home of 中華民族 (Zhong Hua min zu 1222 = Middle-Flower-people-race = the Chinese race). 中華文化 (Zhong Hua wen hua 1224 = Middle-Flower-writing-teach/transform = the Chinese civilization) began in 中原 (zhong yuan 12 = middle-plains = central China). Feudal dynasties 秦 (Qin 2), 漢 (Han 4), 唐 (Tang 2), 宋 (Song 4), 元 (Yuan 2), 明 (Ming 2), 清 (Qing 1) ruled China up to 1911.

In 1949 中華民國 Zhong Hua Min Guo 1222 = Middle-Flower-People-State = the Republic of China, ROC) was replaced by 中華人民共和國 (Zhong Hua Ren Min Gong He Guo 1222422 = Middle-Flower-People-Together-Harmony-State = the People’s Republic of China, PRC). 

by Diana Yue