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

愛
Putonghua pronunciation: ai4 Cantonese pronunciation: oi3
Meanings: First word in Ireland’s Chinese name

Ireland’s Chinese name is 愛爾蘭 (ai4 er3 lan2). These three zi are chosen for their sounds, not their literal meaning “love-you-orchid”. Ireland experienced 1840s’ 大饑荒 (da4 ji1 fang1 = big-hunger-waste = Great Famine), 移民潮 (yi2 min2 chao2 = move-people-tide = emigration wave), 1922’s 南北分裂 (nan2 bei3 fen1 lie4 = south-north-separate-break = north-south partition). 喬伊斯 (qiao2 yi1 si1 = “Joyce”-transliterated)’s novels described 都柏林 (dou1 bo2 lin2 = “Dublin”-transliterated)’s social unrest. 爭議 (zheng1 yi4 = conflict-discuss = debate/controversy), 武力抗爭 (wu3 li4 kang4 zheng1 = military-force-resist-conflict = armed resistance) over British-ruled 北愛 (bei3 ai4 = Northern-Ireland) continue.

1990s’ 經濟繁榮 (jing1 ji4 fan2 rong2 = planning-irrigation-multiply-prosper = economic boom) ended in 2009.

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