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

希
Putonghua pronunciation: xi1
Cantonese pronunciation: gan1
Meanings: First word in Greece’s Chinese name

Greece’s Chinese name is 希臘 (xi1 la4). These two zi are chosen for their sounds, not their literal meaning “hope-wax”.

古希臘 (gu3 xi1 la4 = ancient-Greece) is 搖籃 (yao2 lan2 = rock-basket = cradle) of western civilization. 荷馬 (he2 ma3 = “Homer”-transliterated)’s epics described gods and heroes. 濟慈 (ji4 ci2 = “Keats”-transliterated)’s Ode On A Grecian Urn praised 真 (zhen1, truth), 美 (mei3, beauty).

Modern Greece has 船運業 (chuan2 yun4 ye4 = ship-transport-industry = shipping industry), 旅遊業 (lü3 you2 ye4 = travel-tour-industry = tourist industry). 2010’s 金融危機 (jin1 rong2 wei1 ji1 = gold-merge-danger-opportunity = financial crisis) required serious 節約 (jie2 yue4 = economize-control = austerity) measures, causing riots in 雅典 (ya2 dian3 = “Athens-transliterated”).

by Diana Yue