Character Builder

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: xi1
Cantonese pronunciation: sai1
Meanings: First word in Spain’s Chinese name

Spain’s Chinese name is 西班牙 (xi1 ban1 ya2). These three zi are chosen for their sounds, not their literal meaning “west-striped-teeth”.

Spanish/Portuguese 征服者 (zheng1 fu2 zhe3 = march-subdue-er = conquerors/conquistadors) established colonies in 拉丁美洲 (la1 ding1 mei3 zhou1 = “Latin”-transliterated-“Mei”in-“America”-transliterated = Latin America). After 1930s’ 西班牙內戰 (xi1 ban1 ya2 nei4 zhan4 = Spain-inside-war = the Spanish Civil War), Spain evolved from 王權 (wang2 quan2 = king-power = monarchy) into 共和國 (gong4 he2 guo2 = together-harmony-state = republic).

Inception of 歐羅 (ou1 luo2 = “Euro”-transliterated) spurred 內需 (nei4 xu1 = inside-need = domestic demand), 通脹 (tong1 zhang4 = money-swell = inflation), housing 泡沫 (pao4 mo4 = bubble-foam = bubble), finally recent recession.

by Diana Yue