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 \ 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 territorial disputes

Putonghua pronunciation: tu2
Cantonese pronunciation: to4
Meanings: graphic shape, picture, map, plan, contrive


Idiom 圖窮匕現 (tu2 qiong2 bi3 xian4 = picture/scroll-end-dagger-appear) describes assassin unfurling map, revealing concealed dagger to attack, i.e., deceptive/malicious scheme is exposed.

世界地圖 (shi4 jie4 di4 tu2 = world-border-land-picture = world map/atlas) shows countries’ 版圖 (ban3 tu2 = area-picture = mapped territories). New ruler formulates 治國藍圖 (zh4 guo2 lan2 tu2 = rule-country-blue-picture = blueprint for governing country).

by Diana Yue