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.

This week: Words about Tibet

族

Pronunciation: zu (Putonghua, 2nd tone), juk (Cantonese 6th tone)
Basic meaning: species, tribe, clan, race, nationality

族 means species/clan. Aquariums are 水族箱 (shui zu xiang = aquatic-species-box). Office-workers are 上班族 (shang ban zu = go-shift-tribe). In feudal China, treason was punished by 誅九族 (zhu jiu zu = execute-nine-clans = all clan members beheaded).

民族 (min zu) = people/race: 犹太民族 (you tai min zu = “Jew”-transliterated-race), 阿拉伯民族 (a la bo min zu = “Arab”-transliterated-race). Ethnic minorities are 少數民族 (shao shu min zu = few-number-nationalities).

五族共和 (wu zu gong he = five-nationalities-together-harmony) means 漢 (Han), 滿 (Man = Manchurians), 蒙 (Meng = Mongolians), 回 (Hui = 維吾爾 Wei wu er = Uigurs), 藏 (Zang = Tibetans) live harmoniously, a Chinese state policy upheld since 1911.

by Diana Yue