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 the Hui people

Putonghua pronunciation: hui2
Cantonese pronunciation: wooi4
Meaning: return, Hui people, Islamic religion

Verb 回 (radical 口 kou3, big mouth containing small mouth) means return. Proper noun 回 means Chinese Muslims or Hui people.

In 7th century A.D. 伊斯兰教 (Yi1 Si1 Lan2 jiao4 = “Islam”-transliterated-religion = Islam) entered China with Persian and Arabic merchants, was called 回教 (Hui2 jiao4 = Hui-religion) suggesting 回教徒 (Hui2 jiao4 tu2 = Islam-religion’s-disciples = Muslims) must show faith in words and deeds.

Chinese 穆斯林 (Mu4 Si1 Lin2 = “Muslims”-transliterated) mixed with Mongolians, Han-Chinese, Uygurs, Tibetans etc, formed 回族 (Hui2 zu2 = Hui-ethnic-tribe), worship 真主 (zhen1 zhu3 = True-God) 安拉 (An1 La1 = “Allah”-transliterated), prophet 穆罕默德 (Mu4 Han3 Mo4 De2 = “Muhammad”-transliterated), study 古蘭經 (Gu3 Lan2 Jing1 = “Koran”-transliterated-scriptures = the Koran).

by Diana Yue