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 marine life

族
Putonghua pronunciation: zu2
Cantonese pronunciation: juk6
Meanings: race, tribe, clan, species

族 in humans means 種族 (zhong3 zu2 = ethnic-race-tribe), 民族 (min2 zu2 = people-race), 氏族 (shi4 zu2 = surname-tribe = clan). China has five major ethnic races: 漢 (Han4), 滿 (Man3, Manchus), 蒙 (Meng2, Mongolians), 回 (Hui2, Uighurs), 藏 (Zang4 = Tibetans). 少數民族 (shao3 shu4 min2 zu2 = few-number-people-tribe) = ethnic minorities.

上班族 (shang4 ban1 zu2 = go-up-to-shift-tribe) means white-collar workers. Open societies accept 異族通婚 (yi4 zu2 tong1 hun1 = different-race-through-marry = exogamy). 滅族 (mie4 zu2 = eliminate-race = genocide) is universally condemned.

水族 (shui3 zu2 = water-species) means marine life. Hongkong’s 海洋公園 (hai3 yang2 gong1 yuan2 = sea-ocean-public~garden = Ocean Park) has 水族館 (shui3 zu2 guan3 = water-species-house = aquarium).

by Diana Yue