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

疆
Putonghua pronunciation: jiang1
Cantonese pronunciation: geung1
Meaning: boundary, limit, frontier, territory

疆 (radical 土 tu3) means area/country’s 边界 (jiang1 jie4 = frontier-border), 疆土 (jiang1 tu3 = territory-land). 封疆大吏 (feng1 jiang1 da4 li4 = appointed/bestowed-frontier-big-official) means territorial governor with plenipotentiary status. 疆场 (jiang1 chang3 = border-field) = battlefield.

In 18th-19th centuries, Qing dynasty defeated rebels and czarist Russia, controlled 回疆 (Hui2 jiang1 = Hui-territory), China’s northwestern 邻疆 (bian1 jiang1 = frontier-territory) inhabited by 回族 (Hui-tribes/people).

In 1884, accepting military commander 左宗棠 (Zuo3 Zong1 Tang2 = Zuo Zongtang = General Tso)’s proposal, Qing dynasty established 新疆省 (Xin1 Jiang1 sheng3 = new-frontier-territory-province = Xinjiang province), which became 新疆维吾尔自治区 (Xin1 Jiang1 Wei2 Wu2 Er3 Zi4 Zhi4 Qü1 = Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) in 1955.

by Diana Yue