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

寺
Putonghua pronunciation: si4
Cantonese pronunciation: ji6
Meaning: court, office, temple, monastery


回教 (Hui2 jiao4 = Hui-religion = Chinese Islam) is also called 清真教 (qing1 zhen1 jiao4 = clean-pure/true-religion), from Muslims’ eating/hygiene rules.

清真寺 (qing1 zhen1 si4 = Islamic mosque, from Arabic root meaning 拜倒 bai4 dao3 = worship/pray-prostrate) has 拱顶 (gong3 ding3 = domed-top), 呼拜塔 (hu1 bai4 ta3 = call-to-worship-towers). i.e. 喧嘐塔 (huan4 dao3 ta3 = call-to-prayers-towers), i.e. minarets.

by Diana Yue