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 royal weddings

Putonghua pronunciation: zu2
Cantonese pronunciation: juk6
Meanings: tribe, clan

族 = 種族 (zhong3 zu2 = seed-clan = race), 族群 (zu2 qun2 = clan-group). Chinese population includes 汉族 (Han4 zu2 = Han-race), 滿族 (Man3 zu2 = Manchurian-race), 蒙族 (Meng2 zu2 = Mongolian-race), 回族 (Hui2 zu2 = Uyghur-race), 藏族 (Zang4 zu2 = Tibetan-race), 少數民族 (shao3 shu4 min2 zu2 = few-number-people-tribe = minority races).

水族 (shui3 zu2 = water-tribe) = aquatic life. 上班族 (shang4 ban1 zu2 = mount-shift-tribe) = office employees. 名門望族 (ming2 men2 wang4 zu2 = name-door-fame-tribe) = distinguished clan/family.

貴族 (gui4 zu2 = noble-clan = nobility) exploits 中產階級 (zhong1 chan3 jie1 ji2 = middle-asset-step-tier = middleclass), 勞動階級 (lao2 dong4 jie1 ji2 = toil-move-setp-tier = labor class).

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