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 Han people

族
Putonghua pronunciation: zu2
Cantonese pronunciation: juk6
Meaning: clan, tribe, race, ethnic group, group of chemical elements

族 (containing character 矢 shi3, arrow) suggests bunched-together arrow-heads. 種族 (zhong3 zu2 = seed/breed-tribe) = race. 閃族 (Shan3 zu2 = “Sem”itic-transliterated-race) = Semites. 民族歧視 (zhong3 zu2 qi2 shi4 = seed-race-sideways/incorrect-look = racial discrimination) causes 滅族 (mie4 zu2 = eliminate-race = genocide).

民族國家 (min2 zu2 guo2 jia1 = people-race-country-family) = nation state. China’s five major ethnic groups are 漢 (Han4 race), 滿 (Man3, Manchus), 蒙 (Meng2, Mongols), 回 (Hui = Hui people including 維吾爾族 Wei2 Wu Er3 zu2, “Uighur”-transliterated-race), 藏 (Zang4, Tibetans).

族長 (zu2 zhang3 = clan-leader) keeps/family-clan’s 族譜 (zu2 pu3 = family/clan-records/charts). 上班族 (shang4 ban1 zu2 = mount/attend-shift-tribe) describes blue/white collar class working regular hours.

by Diana Yue