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 territorial disputes

Putonghua pronunciation: tu3
Cantonese pronunciation: to2
Meanings: earth, soil, land, ground, crude, indigenous, local, native

Ideogram 土 shows earth/ground with plant above: 泥土 (ni2 tu3 = soil/mud-earth = soil), 土地 (tu3 di4 = earth-land = land), 陶土 (tao2 tu3 = pottery-earth = potter’s clay), 稀土 (xi1 tu3 = rare-earths). 土包 (tu3 bao1 = earth-bun) = country bumptkins. 出土文物 (chu1 tu3 wen2 wu4 = out/from-ground-cultural-objects) means archeological finds or, facetiously, people/scholars already passé.


Country’s 國土 (guo2 tu3 = country’s-land = national territory) covers 領土 (ling3 tu3 = taken/lead/rule-land = land territory), 領海 (ling3 hai3 = taken/lead/rule-sea = territorial sea/waters), 領空 (ling3 kong1 = taken/lead/rule-sky = airspace).

by Diana Yue