

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 grasslands

原

Putonghua pronunciation: *yuan 2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yuen 4*

Meanings: origin, basic, plain

原 means origin: 原因 (*yuan2 yin1* = origin-reason = reason/cause), 原始森林 (*yuan2 shi3 sen1 lin2* = origin-begin-forests-woods = primitive/virgin forests).

原 means plain: 草原 (*cao3 yuan2* = grassy-plains = grasslands/steppes/prairies/pampas), 原野 (*yuan2 ye3* = plain-wild = uncultivated flatland), 高原 (*gao1 yuan2* = high-plain). 大平原 (*da3 ping2 yuan2* = big-flat-plains) mark the American Midwest. Part of Canada is 凍原 (*dong4 yuan2* = cold/frozen-plains = tundra = treeless plains). T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* is translated as “荒原” (*huang1 yuan2* = lying-in-waste/desolate-plain).

中原 (*zhong1 yuan2*, Central-Plains), today's 河南省 (*he2 nan2 sheng3*, Henan-Province), is cradle of the Chinese civilization. “逐鹿中原” (*zhu2 lu4 zhong1 yuan2* = chasing/hunting-deer-in-Central-Plains) means competing/battling for throne/leadership.

by Diana Yue