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.

This week: Words about Middle East

Pronunciation: mo (Putonghua, 4th tone), mok (Cantonese, 6th tone)
Basic meaning: desert

In the 乾燥 (gan zao = dry-hot) 阿拉伯沙漠 (a la bo sha mo = “Arabia”-transliterated desert), 風沙 (feng sha = wind-sand = sandstorms), 海市蜃樓 (hai shi chun lou = sea-town-clam’s-breath-tower = mirages) are common.

遊牧民族 (you mu min zu = roam-herd-people-tribes = nomadic tribes) rear 駱駝 (luo tuo = camels = 沙漠之舟 sha mo zhi zhou = desert-’s-ship), use caravans for transportation.

水井 (shui jing = water-wells) give rise to 綠洲 (lu zhou = green-island/continent = oases). 棗樹 (zu shu = date-trees), 葡萄 (pu tao = grapes), 無花果 (wu hua guo = hasn’t-flower-fruit = figs), 仙人掌 (xian ren zhang = fairy-person-hand-palm = cacti) are cultivated.

by Diana Yue