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 the Tibetan people

Putonghua pronunciation: cang2, zang4
Cantonese pronunciation: jong6
Meaning: hide, collection, Tibet, Tibetan

藏 (radical 草 cao3, grass) means 收藏 (shou1 cang2 = gather—collect/store), 寶藏 (bao3 zang4 = treasures—collection). 西藏 (Xi1 Zang4 = Tibet), called 世界屋脊 (shi4 jie4 wu1 ji3 = world-border—house—back = roof of the world), was ancient country 吐蕃 (Tu4 Bo1 = Tibet - transliterated). In 藏語 (Zang4 yu3 = Tibetan-language), 藏 means sacred/pure.

藏族 (Zang4 zu2 = Tibetan—race), 藏羚羊 (Zang4 ling2 yang2 = Tibetan—antelopes) inhabit 青藏高原 (Qing1 Zang4 gao1 yuan2 = Qinghai—Tibet Plateau). 青藏鐵路 (Qing1 Zang4 tie3 lu4 = Qinghai—Tibet—Railway) 入藏 (ru4 Zang4 = enters—Tibet), ends at 拉薩 (la1 sa4 = Lhasa - transliterated), capital of 西藏自治區 (Xi1 Zang4 zhi3 zhi4 qui1 = Xizang/Tibet Autonomous Region, established 1959).

by Diana Yue