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

山 (radical 崖 feng1, peak, 崎 ling3, range, 坡 po1, slope) means mountains/hills. Cameraman photographs 火山 (huo3 shan1 = fire~mountain = volcano), 冰山 (bing1 shan1 = ice~berg), 山民 (shan1 min2 = mountain~people/rustics). Poet praises nation’s 壯麗山河 (zhuang4 li4 shan1 he2 = brave/grand~beautiful~mountains~rivers = sweeping/beautiful land/landscapes).

爬山隊 (pa2 shan1 dui4 = climb~mountain~team = mountaineering team) climbs 珠穆朗瑪峰 (Zhu1 Mu4 Lang3 Ma3 feng1 = Qomolangma Peak = Mount Everest) on 喜馬拉雅山脈 (Xi3 Ma3 La1 Ya3 shan1 mai4 = “Himalaya”-transliterated~mountain~vein/range = the Himalayas).

Tibetan Plateau has 高山 (gao1 shan1 = tall~mountains), 雪山 (xue3 shan1 = snowy~peaks): the 崑崙 (Kun1 Lun2 = Kunlun), 天山 (Tian1 Shan1 = heaven~mountain = Tianshan) ranges.

by Diana Yue