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 Mongolian people

蒙 (radical 艹 = 草 cao3, grass) means 蒙骗 (meng2 pian4 = cover-up-deceive). 蒙古 (Meng2 Gu3 = original meaning “eternal fire”) were 東胡 (dong1 Hu2 = eastern-Hu/non-Han tribes) occupying Asia’s northeastern steppes. China’s five major ethnic groups are 漢 (Han4 race), 滿 (Man3, Manchus), 蒙 (Meng2, Mongols), 回 (Hui2 = Hui people), 藏 (Zang4, Tibetans).

Historically, 蒙漢 (Meng2 Man3 = Mongolians and Manchurians, both nomadic peoples) were enemies. Qing Dynasty’s Manchurian regime befriended Mongolians, adapted vertical-running 蒙文 (Meng2 wen2 = Mongolian-writing-script) into Manchurian writing-script.

內蒙 (Nei4 Meng2 = Inner-Mongolia, 1,183,000 sq.km.) is autonomous region in China. 外蒙 (Wai4 Meng2 = Outer-Mongolia) split from China in 1911, became independent People’s Republic of Mongolia (1,730,000 sq.km.) in 1946, is now called Mongolia.

by Diana Yue