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

Putonghua pronunciation: qi2, ji4
Cantonese pronunciation: ke4, kei4
Meaning: mount, ride, ride horse, horse-and-rider


鐵木真 (Tie3 Mu4 Jin1 = Temü în,), aka 成吉斯汗 (Cheng2 Ji2 Si1 Han4 = Genghis Khan, 1162-1227 AD), led Mongolian 騎兵 (qi2 bing1 = horseback-soldiers, cavalry) on three westward expeditions, founded four 汗國 (han4 guo2 = khan-state = kingdoms/khanates).

Temü in's grandson 忽必烈 (Hu1 Bi4 Lie4 = Kublai Khan), leading Mongolian 鐵騎 (tie3 ji4 = iron-horse-and-rider = brave/undefeatable horsemen), marched south, conquered Song Dynasty, founded 元朝 (Yuan2 chao2 = Yuan-Dynasty, 1271-1368, capital 大都 Da4 Du1 = big-capital = today's Beijing).

by Diana Yue