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

牧
Putonghua pronunciation: mu4
Cantonese pronunciation: muk6
Meaning: let graze, herd, animal herding, herder, governor

牧 (radical 牛 niu2, cattle/ox) means 畜牧 (cu4 mu4 = breeding-herding of grazing animals) or herder/ruler: 牧人 (mu4 ren2 = herds-man), 牧童 (mu4 tong2 = shepherd/buffalo-boy), 州牧 (zhou1 mu4 = prefecture's-governor in ancient China), Christians call Jesus 牧羊人 (mu4 yang2 ren2 = shep-herd), call vicars 牧師 (mu4 shi1 = past-ors).

遊牧民族 (you2 mu4 min2 zu2 = roam-herd-people-tribe = nomadic people) move around 牧場 (mu4 chang3 = grazing-grounds), seeking 牧草 (mu4 cao3 = grazing/herbage/forage-grasses) for 放牧 (fang4 mu4 = free-range/letting-animals-graze).

Ancient song lyrics “風吹草低見牛羊 (feng1 cui1 cao3 di1 jian4 niu2 yang2 = wind-blows-grass-lowers/bends-see/appear-cattle-sheep)” suggest sweeping landscape on 坝上 (Ba4 Shang4 = Bashang Plateau = meadowland escalating to Mongolian plateau).

by Diana Yue