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

包
Putonghua pronunciation: bao1
Cantonese pronunciation: baau1
Meaning: wrap, packet, package, bundle, contain, bun, tent

包 (radical 日 = 包 bao1, wrap) means 包裹 (bao1 guo3 = wrapped-parcel), 包圍 (bao1 wei2 = enwrap-encircle = surround), 包括 (bao1 kuo4 = contain-include), 包容 (bao1 rong2 = over-embrace-tolerate). 包袱 (bao1 fu2 = wrapped-cloth-bundle) also means burden. 收紅包 (shou1 hong2 bao1 = take-red-packet containing money) means taking graft/bribes. 包 is steamed/baked dough: 叉燻包 (cha1 shao1 bao1 = fork-roast-wrap = steamed bun with barbecued-pork filling).

Mongolians live in 蒙古包 (Meng2 Gu3 bao1 = Mongol-bun = dome-topped felt tents = yurts). Mongolians pray and make offerings to 敖包 (ao2 bao1, Mongolian term meaning heaps of stones/earth/grass, landmarks believed to be abode of local deities).

Manchurian nobles owned 包衣 (bao1 yil, Manchurian term meaning subordinates/slaves from lower class).

by Diana Yue