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 Dunhuang

藏 (radical 草 = 草 cao3, grass) means hide/keep/collection/store. Squirrels 收藏 (zhu4 cang2 = hoard-store) nuts. Spy 收藏身 (cang2 shen1 = hides-body/himself) in closet. Museums 收藏 (shou1 cang2 = acquire-collect) relics/artworks.

Crossing NW China's 戈壁滩 (Ge1 Bi3 tan1 = Gobi-Desert) on camelback, ancient Chinese/foreign merchants followed 絲綢之路 (si1 chou2 zhi1 lu4 = silk-satin’s-road = the Silk Road) along which four settlements 酒泉 (Jiu3 Quan2), 武威 (Wu3 Wei1), 張掖 (Zhang1 Yi4), 敦煌 (Dun1 Huang2, ancient meaning: great-prosperous/glorious) flourished.

Buddhists dug hundreds of caves/grottoes in hillside, built 佛窟 (fo2 kan1 = Buddhist-shrines), 敦煌石窟 (Dun1 Huang2 shi2 ku1 = Dunhuang-stone-grottoes) house priceless 寶藏 (bao3 zang4 = treasure-collection) of Buddhist statues and murals over a millennium.