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 horses

馬

Putonghua pronunciation: ma3
Cantonese pronunciation: ma5
Meaning: horse

Pictogram 馬 (showing mane and four dots as legs) is also a radical for horse-related characters: 駒 (jū, donkey), 駱 (tuo2, camel), 駛 (yi4, relay station). 駒術 (ma3 shu4 = horse-method) = equestrian art/sports. 千里馬 (qian1 li3 ma3 = thousand-miles-horse) = superb horse/talent. 駒戲 (ma3 xi4 = horse-play/show) = circus.

Chief 出馬 (chu1 ma3 = out-horse = wields authority): Reforms 上馬 (shang4 ma3 = up/mount-horse = are launched), non-performing officials/projects 下馬 (xia4 ma3 = down/dismount-horse = are sacked/scrapped).

汗血寶馬 (han4 xue3 bao3 ma3 = sweat-blood-treasure-horse) = stallions from Turkmenistan, allegedly sweating blood. 人馬座 (ren2 ma3 zuo4 = person-horse-seat) is zodiac sign Sagittarius. 天馬行空 (tian1 ma3 xing2 kong1 = heavenly-horse-walk-in-sky) describes boundless imagination or empty bluff.

by Diana Yue