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

蹄 Putonghua pronunciation: ti2
Cantonese pronunciation: tai4
Meaning: hoof, hooved leg

蹄 (radical 足 zu2, foot) = hooved animal’s hoof/leg; 牛蹄 (niu2 ti2 = cow’s-hoof/leg), 羊蹄 (yang2 ti2 = sheep’s-hoof/leg), 口蹄病 (kou3 ti2 bing4 = pigs’/cows’/foot/hoof-and-mouth-disease), Cooks make stewed 蹄膀 (ti2 bang3 = hoof-arm = pig’s upper-leg/knuckle), 蹄筋 (ti2 jin1 = cow/pig/sheep's leg's-tendon).

马蹄 (ma3 ti2 = horse’s-hoof/leg) also means water chestnut.

马蹄铁 (ma3 ti2 tie3 = horse-hoof-iron) = horseshoe. 蹄声得得 (ti2 sheng1 de2 de2 = hooves-sound-de-de) = onomatopoeic description of trotting horse’s hoof-beat.

马失前蹄 (ma3 shi3 qian2 ti2 = horse-lose/slip-front-hoof = horse’s front leg slips) describes venture ruined by unexpected fatal error. 鐵蹄下 (tie3 ti2 xia4 = iron-hooves-under) describes people suffering under cruel invaders, e.g. Chinese during Japanese Invasion (1937-1945).

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