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 Hui people

漠
Putonghua pronunciation: mo4
Cantonese pronunciation: mok6
Meaning: expansive, indifferent, desert

漠 (radical 水 = shui3, water) means expansive/indifferent or 沙漠 (sha1 mo4 = sandy-desert).

Mongolian term 戈壁 (ge1 bi4) means arid, gravel-covered 荒漠 (huang1 mo4 = barren-desert). The Himalayas' 雨影 (yu3 ying3 = rain-shadow) effect formed 戈壁溝 (Ge1 Bi4 tan1 = Ge-bi-beach = Gobi Desert) in north-northwest China. 大漠孤煙直, 長河落日圓 (da4 mo4 gu1 yan1 zhi2, chang2 he2 luo4 ri4 yuan2 = great-desert-single-smoke-vertical, long-river-setting-sun-red) is ancient poet's impressionistic description.

Camels are 沙漠之舟 (sha1 mo4 zhi1 zhou1 = desert-'s-ship = ship of the desert). 雙峰駱駝 shuang1 feng1 luo4 tuo2 = two-humped-Bactrian-camels) formed caravans on ancient 絲綢之路 (si1 chou2 zhi1 lu4 = silk-satin-'s-road = Silk Road).

by Diana Yue