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 grasslands

原

Putonghua pronunciation: yuan 2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen 4
Meanings: origin, basic, plain

原 means origin: 原因 (yuan2 yin1 = origin-reason = reason/cause), 原始森林 (yuan2 shi3 sen1 lin2 = origin-begin-forests-woods = primitive/virgin forests).

原 means plain: 草原 (cao3 yuan2 = grassy-plains = grasslands/steppes/prairies/pampas), 原野 (yuan2 ye3 = plain-wild = uncultivated flatland), 高原 (gao1 yuan2 = high-plain). 大平原 (da3 ping2 yuan2 = big-flat-plains) mark the American Midwest. Part of Canada is 凍原 (dong4 yuan2 = cold/frozen-plains = tundra = treeless plains). T S Eliot’s The Waste Land is translated as “荒原” (huang1 yuan2 = lying-in-waste/desolate-plain).

中原 (zhong1 yuan2, Central-Plains), today’s 河南省 (he2 nan2 sheng3, Henan-Province), is cradle of the Chinese civilization. “逐鹿中原” (zhu2 lu4 zhong1 yuan2 = chasing/hunting-deer-in-Central-Plains) means competing/battling for throne/leadership.

by Diana Yue