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

騨 (radical 马 ma3, horse)
Putonghua pronunciation: qi 2, ji 4
Cantonese pronunciation: ke 4
Meanings: ride horse, horse

Pictogram 马 shows mane and four dots/legs. Verb 驲 means ride: 驲马 (qi2 ma3 = ride-horse), 驲车 (qi2 che1 = ride-car = ride bicycle), 驲兵 (qi2 bing1 = ride-soldier = cavalrmen). Noun 騲 (ji4) means horse-and-rider: 千里走單騨 (qian1 li3 zou3 dan1 ji4 = thousand-miles-runs-lone-rider) = single warrior/agent going far out on a challenging mission.

騨術 (qi2 shu4 = riding-method) = horseback-riding/equestrianism. King Arthur’s knights are 騲士 (qi2 shi4 = ride-soldiers), chivalry is 騲士精神 (qi2 shi4 jing1 shen2 = knight’s-essence-spirit).

騨虎難下 (qi2 hu3 nan2 xia4 = riding-tiger-difficult-to-descend) means unable to disentangle oneself from an awkward involvement/commitment. 騲牆派 (qi2 qiang2 pai4 = ride/sit-on-wall-faction) are fickle opportunists sitting aloof and bending towards whoever offers advantages.

by Diana Yue