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

蒙古 (Meng2 Gu3 = Mon-gol) people were 東胡 (dong1 Hu2 = eastern-Hu-people = eastern non-Han tribes) living in 蒙古包 (Meng2 Gu3 bao1 = Mon-golian-tents) on Asia’s northeastern steppes.

成吉思汗 (Cheng2 Ji2 Si1 Han4 = Genghis Khan) led cavalrymen riding 蒙古馬 (Meng2 Gu2 ma3 = Mon-golian-ponies), 馬上得天 下 (ma3 shang4 de2 tian1 xia4 = horse-on-wins-heaven-below = conquered the world on horseback). His grandson 忽必烈 (Hu1 Bi4 Lie4 = Kublai Khan) founded 元朝 (Yuan2 chao2 = Yuan-Dynasty, 1271-1368, capital 大都 Da4 Du1 = big-capital = today’s Beijing), built vast 蒙古帝國 (Meng2 Gu3 di4 guo2 = Mon-gol-emperor-state = Mongolian empire).

Mongolian 摔跤 (shuai1 jiao1 = thrust/throw-fall = wrestling) is a well-known sport.

by Diana Yue