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 Tibetan people

密 Putonghua pronunciation: mi4
Cantonese pronunciation: mat6
Meaning: tight, secret, hidden, occult, Tantric Buddhism

密 (shan1, mountain + 密 mi4, place, suggesting narrow/hidden locale in mountains) means tight/hidden: 密雲 (mi4 yun2 = thick-clouds), 嚴密 (yan2 mi4 = tightly-closed/sealed), 私密 (si1 mi4 = personal-privacy).

Agents 密談 (mi4 tan2 = secretly-talk), exchange 密碼 (mi4 ma3 = secret-codes = cryptograms). Lovers are 親密 (qin1 mi4 = dear-and-close = intimate).

藏傳佛教 (Zang4 chuan2 fo2 jiao4 = Tibet-inherit/transmit-Buddha-religion = Tibetan Buddhism) is mainly 密宗 (Mi4 Zong1 = secret-sect = Tantric Buddhism) which emphasizes 秘密 (mi4 mi4 = secretive-intimate) teaching/transference of doctrines, 儀式 (yi2 shi1 = rituals-formalities), 咒語 (zhou4 yu3 = vow-words = secret incantations), 冥想 (ming2 xiang3 = dark/deep-think = meditation), devotion to 上師 (shang4 shi1 = high-teacher/master = guru).

by Diana Yue