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 lonely people

Putonghua pronunciation: qu1
Cantonese pronunciation: goo1
Meanings: alone, solitary, single, fatherless, orphaned

孤 (radical 子 zi3, son) = alone/orphaned: 孤岛 (gu1 dao3 = isolated-island), 孤本 (gu1 ben3 = book/text's only-copy), 孤兒院 (gu1 er2 yuân4 = orphaned-children-building = orphanage).

In drama 趙氏孤兒 (Zhao4 shì4 gu1 er2 = Zhao-clan-orphan = The Orphan of Zhao), martyr’s dying wife 托孤 (tuo4 gu1 = entrusted-orphan) to physician: “Help my 遺孤 (yi2 gu1 = remnant-orphan = orphan)”

孤苦伶仃 (gu1 ku3 ling2 ding1 = alone-poor-thin-helpless) describes parentless/helpless kid. Singleton feels 孤軍 (gu1 jūn1 = lonely-isolated/friendless). 孤立 (gu1 li4 = isolated-stand = isolated/un-aided) person 孤軍作戰 (gu1 jūn1 zuò2 zhan4 = single-army-make-battle = fights/struggles alone).

Chinese emperor’s modest self-reference 孤家寡人 (gu1 jia1 gua3 ren2 = lonely-home-spouseless/lacking-person) now facetiously describes bachelors.

by Diana Yue