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 sheep and goats

毛
Putonghua pronunciation: mao2
Cantonese pronunciation: mo4
Meaning: hair, wool, fleece, down, small

毛 = hair/wool: 羽毛 (yù3 mao2 = feather-hair = feathers), 體毛 (ti3-mao2 = body-hair), 陰毛 (yin1 mao2 = shaded/private-part-hair = pubic hair), 毛衣 (mao2 yi1 = woolen-cardigan). 毛筆 (mao2 bi3 = hair-pen) = Chinese writing/painting brush.

毛毛蟲 (mao2 mao2 chong2 = hairy-hairy-worm) = caterpillar.

毛毛雨 (mao2 mao2 yu3 = hair/small-hair/small-rain) means drizzle. 白毛風 (bai2 mao2 feng1 = white-hair-wind) = snowy gale/windstorm.

Junior economist 嘴上無毛 (zui3 shang4 wu2 mao2 = mouth-top-no-hair = is too young, can't even grow mustache), only has 皮毛 (pi2 mao2 = skin-hair = superficial) knowledge, doesn't understand 羊毛出在羊身上 (yang2 mao2 chu1 zai4 yang2 shen1 shang4 = sheep's-wool-comes-from-sheep's-body- surface = profit/gain is already annulled by the cost/loss).

by Diana Yue