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

群 Putonghua pronunciation: qún2
Cantonese pronunciation: kwan4
Meaning: crowd, group, herd, flock, fold, many

群 (radical 羊 yang2, sheep/goat) means group/flock: 群島 (qún2 dao3 = group-of-islands = archipelago), 人群 (ren2 qún2 = human-crowd), 族群 (zu2 qún2 = tribal/ethnic-group), 社群 (she4 qún2 = social-group). 群居 (qún2 jū1 = group-reside) = live together as cluster/group.

Dynasty topples, 群雄並起 (qún2 xiong2 bing4 qi3 = many-heroes-together-rise = contenders emerge), rally 群眾 (qún2 qùn2 zòng4 = group-crowd = the people/masses). 群魔亂舞 (qún2 mó2 luan4 wu3 = group/many-devils-confusedly-dance) describes evil-doers threatening society.

狼群 (lang2 qún2 = wolves-group = pack of wolves) attack 羊群 (yang2 qún2 = sheep/goat-group = flock), snatch 失群 (shī qún2 = lose-flock = lost) lamb. Maxim: Be 合群 (he2 qún2 = join-group = cooperative/sociable). Don't 難群 (li2 qún2 = leave-the-fold)!

by Diana Yue