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

牧 (radical 牛 niu2, cattle)
Putonghua pronunciation: mu 4
Cantonese pronunciation: muk 6
Meanings: let graze, herd, herd'sman

牧 = 畜牧 (cu4 mu4 = breed-herd) animals: 牛 (niu2, cattle/ cows/bulls/buffalos), 羊 (yang2, sheep/goats/rams/ewes), 馬 (ma3 = horses/ponies/stallions/mares), 豬 (zhu1, pigs/swine/hogs), 駝駝 (luo4 tuo2 = camels). 遊牧民族 (you2 mu4 min2 zu2 = roam-herd-people-tribe = nomadic tribes) seek grasslands/pastures to 放牧 (fang4 mu4 = free-graze = let animals graze).

Chinese paintings depict 牧童 (mu4 tong2 = herd-child = shepherd/buffalo boy) riding 水牛 (shui3 niu2 = water-cattle = water buffalo). Westerns feature 牛仔 (niu2 zai3 = cow-boys) working on 牧場 (mu4 chang3 = herd-field = ranches).

Christianity likens Jesus to 牧羊人 (mu4 yang2 ren2 = herd-sheep-person = shepherd) leading 羊群 (yang2 qun2 = sheep-group = flock), hence the term 牧師 (mu4 shi1 = shepherd-master = pastor/vicar).

by Diana Yue