

Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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



Putonghua pronunciation: *yang2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yeung4*

Meaning: sheep, goat, ram, ewe, lamb

羊 = 綿羊 (*mian2 yang2* = soft/woolly-sheep = sheep), 山羊 (*shan1 yang2* = mountain-goat). 牧羊人 (*mu4 yang2 ren2* = herd-sheep/goats-person) = shepherd/goatherd. Northwestern Chinese worship 羊圖騰 (*yang2 tu2 teng2* = sheep/goat-"totem"- transliterated), eat 羊肉串 (*yang2 rou4 chuan4* = sheep/goat-meat-string = mutton/lamb kebabs).

羊 is radical of many characters with good meaning: 善 (*shan4*, good/kind), 義 (*yi4*, righteousness). 養 (*yang3*, feed/breed/nurture) is 羊 + 食 (*shi2*, food). 美 (*mei3*, beauty/beautiful) is 羊 + 大 (*da4*, big). 鮮 (*xian1*, fresh/flavorsome) is 魚 (*yü2*, fish) + 羊.

This year is 羊年 (*yang2 nian2* = sheep-year = year of sheep/ram in Chinese lunar calendar's twelve-year animal-zodiac cycle). Alibaba is 領頭羊 (*ling3 tou2 yang2* = lead-head-sheep/goat = leader) of China's on-line marketing business.

by Diana Yue