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 ancient fables

馬 Putonghua pronunciation: ma3
Cantonese pronunciation: ma5
Meanings: horse

Pictogram 馬 resembles horse with flying mane and four legs: 牧馬 (mu4 ma3 = herd/breed-horses), 奔馬 (ben1 ma3 = galloping-horse), 马車 (ma3 che1 = horse-carriage/chariot), 马路 (ma3 lu4 = horse-road = road for horses/cars).

Oldster dwelling at border 失馬 (shi1 ma3 = lost-a-horse): 禍 (huo4, ill-luck mishap/misfortune). Horse returned with another horse: 福 (fu2, luck/fortune/blessing). Oldster’s son 墮馬 (duo4 ma34 = fell-from-horse), was crippled: 有禍 (you3 huo4, = had-ill-luck). Other men were conscripted to fight invading barbarians, crippled son avoided conscription/fighting/death: 有福 (you3 fu2 = was-lucky).

Quote this fable to comfort loser: 塞翁失馬, 焉知非福 (sai4 weng1 shi1 ma3, yan1 zhi1 fei1 fu2 = border-old-man-loses-horse, how-know-isn’t-blessing?): “Who knows if your loss isn’t a blessing in disguise?”