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 fortune-telling

兆
Putonghua pronunciation: zhao4
Cantonese pronunciation: siu6
Meanings: portend, portent, sign, omen

兆 = 兆頭 (zhao4 tou2 = portend-head = portent/omen). Pains are 徵兆 (zheng1 zhao4 = symbol-sign) of illness. Animals’ unrest 預兆 (yu4 zhao4 = anticipate-portend) earthquake.

Soothsayers watch 天象 (tian1 xiang4 = sky/heavenly-signs): 雲氣 (yun2 qi4 = clouds-air = clouds’ formation), 星象 (xing1 xiang4 = stars’-signs/appearance), 流星雨 (liu2 xing1 yu3 = flow-star-rain = meteor showers), 預言 (yu4 yan2 = anticipate-say = predict/prophesy) 吉凶 (ji1 xiong1 = auspicious/fortune-ominous/misfortune = success or failure) of military/political enterprises. 彗星 (hui4 xing1 = broom-stars = comets) are 不祥之兆 (bu4 xiang2 zhi1 zhao4 = no-luck-’s-omen = ominous signs).

Peasants believe 瑞雪兆豐年 (rui4 xue3 zhao4 feng1 nian2 = auspicious-snow-portend-abundant-year = good snow means good harvest).

by Diana Yue