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

羊 Putonghua pronunciation: yang2 Cantonese pronunciation: yeung4
Meaning: sheep, goat, ram, ewe, lamb


羊 is radical of many characters with good meaning: 善 (shan4, good/kind), 禹 (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 (yu2, 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