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

吉
Putonghua pronunciation: ji2
Cantonese pronunciation: gat1
Meanings: lucky

吉 = auspicious/luck: 吉利 (ji1 li4 = lucky/auspicious-beneficial), 吉兆 (ji2 zhao4 = lucky-omen), 吉祥物 (ji2 xiang2 wu4 = luck-fortune-object = mascot). “如意吉祥” (ru2 yi4 ji2 xiang2 = as-desire-luck-fortune = “Good fortune as desired”) are words of blessing.

通書 (tong1 shu1 = through-book = fortune-telling almanac) advises: choose 吉日 (ji2 ri4 = good-luck-days) for 嫁娶 (jia4 qu3 = marry-husband-marry-wife = wedding), 動土 (dong4 tu3 = move-earth = inaugurate digging/construction), 遠行 (yuan3 xing2 = far-walk/travel).

Lucky guys 吉星高照 (ji2 xing1 gao1 zhao4 = lucky-star-high-above-shine). Facing obnoxious/precarious persons/situations, smart guys 避之則吉 (bi4 zhi1 ze2 ji2 = avoid-it-thus-lucky), 溜之大吉 (liu1 zhi1 da4 ji2 = roll-away-it-big-luck = simply run away).

by Diana Yue