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 migrant workers

Putonghua pronunciation: hui2
Cantonese pronunciation: woo4
Meanings: return

回來 (hui2 lai2 = return-come) means coming back, 回去 (hui2 qu4 = return-go) means going back. 來回票 (lai2 hui2 piao4 = come-go-ticket) = return ticket.

浪子回頭 (lang4 zi3 hui2 tou2 = wayward-son-turn-back-head) describes Prodigal Son’s return. 回歸熱 (hui2 gui1 re4 = return-return-heat/fever) means overseas Chinese’s fervor of visiting/re-settling in Motherland or immersing in Motherland’s culture.

In China, massive 春運 (chun1 yun4 = spring-transport = Spring Festival travel season) begins before Chinese New Year. Migrant workers/students take trains/buses 回家 (hui2 jia1 = return-home) 過年 (guo4 nian2 = pass-year = spend the New Year). 回鄉證 (hui2 xiang1 zheng4, return-home-village~ document = 回鄉卡 hui2 xiang1 ka3, return-home-village~card = Home Return Permit) allows Hongkong/Macao residents to enter Mainland.

by Diana Yue