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

祥
Putonghua pronunciation: xiang2
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung4
Meaning: auspicious, benign, blessed, hallowed, favorable, agreeable, propitious, peaceful, kind

祥 (radical 禾 = shi4, divine revelation + 羊 yang2, sheep/goat) means auspicious. Comet is 祥兆 (xiang2 zhao4 = auspicious sign) to astrologers. Timely snow is 祥瑞 (xiang2 rui4 = auspicious-jade/symbol = benign sign) to farmers. 祥雲 (xiang2 yün2 = lovely/hallowed-clouds = halos) encircle fairy's abode. Old superstition says widows are 不祥 (bu4 xiang2 = not-auspicious = causing bad luck).

Child adores mother’s 慈祥 (ci2 xiang2 = kind/loving-peaceful) expression. Guangzhou Asian Games' 吉祥物 (jil xiang2 wu4 = luck-thing = mascot) shows five goats because Guangzhou is also called 五羊城 (wu3 yang2 cheng2 = five goats-city).

如意吉祥 (ru2 yi4 ji2 xiang2 = as-feeling/intent-auspicious-blessed = “May you have all the blessings you wish for”) is greatly-welcomed New Year blessing.

by Diana Yue