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 migrants' home-coming

春天 (chun1 tian1 = spring-sky/days) = 春季 (chun1 ji4 = spring season/quarter).

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过新年 (guo4 xin1 nian2 = pass-new-year) means celebrating 新春 (xin1 chun1 = new-spring = New Year season). Chinese 农曆 (nong2 li4 = farmer's-almanac = lunar calendar) celebrates 除夕 (chu2 xi1 = minus-evening = New Year’s Eve), 春節 (chun1 jie2 = spring-festival = first days of First Lunar Month), 元宵 (yuan2 xiao1 = first-night = fifteenth day of First Lunar Month, Lantern Festival).

In springtime, 萬象更新 (wan4 xiang4 geng1 xin1 = ten-thousand-images-change-new = the world is refreshed/ regenerated). Teenage girls 思春 (si1 chun1 = think/want-spring = fancy romance). 貓兒叫春 (mao1 er2 jiao4 chun1 = cat-diminutive-call-spring = cats on heat make springtime mating cries).