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

运
Putonghua pronunciation: yun4
Cantonese pronunciation: wan6
Meanings: transport, work, activate


China’s 春運 (chun1 yun4 = spring-movement) means massive movement of 农民工 (nong2 min2 gong1 = farm-people-worker = migrant laborers from rural areas) taking 春節 (chun1 jie2 = Spring Festival) holidays to go home.

This year 公共運輸 (gong1 gong4 yun4 shu1 = public-common-transport-convey = public transportation) supplied 客運 (ke4 yun4 = visitors/travelers-transport), 貨運 (huo3 uim4 = goods-transport = baggage transport) for over 二億 (er4 yi1 = two-hundred-million = 0.2 billion) migrants.

by Diana Yue