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

Putonghua pronunciation: hui2
Cantonese pronunciation: woon4
Meanings: return


China’s 農民工 (nong2 min2 gong1 = farm-people-worker = migrant laborers from rural areas) 回鄉 (hui2 xiang1 = return-to-home-village-town) to spend lunar New Year. Buying 來回票 (lai2 hui2 piao4 = come-go-ticket = return tickets) means they will not 一去不回 (yi1 qu4 bu4 hui2 = one-go-no-return = go away for good).

When weather 回暖 (hui2 nuan3 = return-warm = becomes warm again), we laugh: “春回大地!” (chun1 hui2 da4 di4 = spring-returns-big-land = “It’s spring again!”)

by Diana Yue