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

鄉
Putonghua pronunciation: xiang1
Cantonese pronunciation: heung1
Meanings: rural, village

鄉 means countryside/land: 鄉村 (xiang1 cun1 = rural-village), 鄉下 (xiang1 xia4 = rural-down = countryside), 下鄉 (xia4 xiang1 = down-rural = go to the countryside), 鄉下人 (xiang1 xia4 ren2 = rural-in-person = villager), 夢鄉 (meng4 xiang1 = dream-land).

Migrants return to 家鄉 (jia1 xiang1 = home-village = native town/village) to spend New Year, meet 家人 (jia1 ren2 = family-people/members), 鄉親 (xiang1 qin1 = village's-close-relatives/friends), hear 鄉音 (xiang1 yin1 = village-sound = native accents), forget 鄉愁 (xiang1 chou2 = native-town/village- sadness = nostalgia for home).

鄉鎮企業 (xiang1 zhen4 qi3 ye4 = village-small-town-establish-profession = enterprises in small villages/towns) can improve economy of 窮鄉僻壤 (qiong2 xiang1 pi4 rang3 = poverty-village-remote-land = impoverished far-out regions).

by Diana Yue