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

### 流

- **Putonghua pronunciation:** liu2
- **Cantonese pronunciation:** lau4
- **Meanings:** flow, stream

Noun 流 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) = flow/stream: 流水 (liu2 shui3 = flowing-water), 河流 (he2 liu2 = river-stream), 海流 (hai3 liu2 = ocean-current). 上流 (shang1 liu2 = up-flow) = upper-crust of society, 下流 (xia4 liu2 = low-flow) describes base/despicable people.


China’s 流動人口 (liu2 dong4 ren2 kou3 = flow-move-people-mouths = population on the move) peaks during New Year, when migrant workers go home.

*by Diana Yue*