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 winter grandchildren

肖
Putonghua pronunciation: xiao4
Cantonese pronunciation: chiu3
Meaning: look like, resemble


Chinese zodiac designates one of 十二生肖 (shi2 er4 sheng1 xiao4 = ten-two-born/birth-resemble = twelve “birth-likeness of animals” in twelve-year cycle), to everyone according to his/her birth-year, e.g. Richard (born 1950), Tony (born 1986) both 肖虎 (xiao4 hu3 = have-birth-likeness-of-tiger).

Twins 酷肖 (ku4 xiao4 = very-much-resemble) each other. Angered/disappointed father calls bad/disobedient son “不肖子!” (bu4 xiao4 zi3 = no-resemblance-son = “Can’t match your father/ancestors!”)

by Diana Yue