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 wedding day

吉
Putonghua pronunciation: ji2
Cantonese pronunciation: gat1
Meaning: luck, lucky, good, auspicious

吉 (showing weapon lying on weapon-holder) suggests ceasefire/peace, i.e. 吉利 (ji1 li4 = lucky-beneficial). Magpies’ song is 吉兆 (ji2 zha4 = lucky-omen). 吉人天相 (ji2 ren2 tian1 xiang4 = good/blessed-person-heaven-protect) describes lucky person who can always 趋吉避凶 (qū ji2 bi4 xiong1 = approach-fortune-avoid-misfortune = capture lucky spells, avoid unlucky events). Classic poetry lines “有女懷春，吉士誘之” (you3 nü3 huai2 chun1, ji2 shi4 you3 zhi1 = there-is-girl-bosom-holding-spring, good-man-lures-her) describes willing girl being wooed/seduced by becoming/romantic lad.

吉 is part of character 喜 (xi3, joy). Couple picks 良辰吉日 (liang2 chen2 ji2 ri4 = good-hour-auspicious-date = auspicious day in calendar) for 禮喜事 (ban4 xi3 shi4 = arrange-joyous-event = holding wedding).

by Diana Yue