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 Guangdong Province

羊
Putonghua pronunciation: yang2
Cantonese pronunciation: yeung4
Meanings: sheep, goat, ram, ewe, lamb

羊 has good associations. Radical 禾 (shi4 = god) + 羊 = 祥 (xiang2 = good omen/fortune). 羊 + 大 (da4, big) = 美 (mei3, beauty/beautiful). Northwestern China’s 羌 (Qiang1) tribe worships 羊圖騰 (yang2 tu2 teng2 = sheep/goat-“totem”-transliterated).

Legend says five fairy goats relieved Guangzhou’s famine, hence city’s other name 羊城 (yang2 cheng2 = goats–city). 羊 and 洋 are homophones. Guangzhou Asian Games’ 吉祥物 (ji1 xiang2 wu4 = luck-fortune-thing = mascot) is five goats, symbolizing 喜氣洋洋 (xi3 qi4 yang2 yang2 = joyous-air/atmosphere-flow = joy/cheer).

China’s cartoon series 喜羊羊與灰太狼 (Xi3 Yang2 Yang2 yu3 Hui1 Tai4 Lang2 = merry-sheep–sheep–and–grey-big/huge-wolf) is TV hit featuring Big Grey Wolf’s clan clumsily trying to hunt/eat smart Happy Sheep/Goats.

by Diana Yue