

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 waltzes

旋

Putonghua pronunciation: *xüan2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *suen4*

Meanings: revolve, turn, whirl, swirl, circle round, manoeuvre

Etymologically, 旋 means feet following movement of whirling banners. Planet/windmill/merry-go-round 旋轉 (*xüan2 zhuan3* = whirl-turn = rotates/circles/spins/revolves/turns). 旋渦 (*xüan2 wo1* = whirl-eddy) = whirlpool/eddy.

Seagulls/war-planes 盤旋 (*pan3 xüan2* = pan~whirl = 迴旋 *hui2 xüan2* = circle~whirl = make rounds) in air. 旋風式訪問 (*xüan2 feng1 shi1 fang3 wen4* = whirl~wind~type~visit~ask) = whirlwind visit.

Johann Strauss's 皇帝圓舞曲 (*huang2 di4 yüan2 wu3 qu3* = emperor~ruler~round~dance~melody = Emperor/Kaizer Waltz) has lovely 旋律 (*xüan2 lü4* = whirl~rule = melody). 華爾滋節奏 (*hua2 er3 zi1 jie2 zou4* = "waltz"-transliterated-segment/bar-play = waltz rhythm) is typically 三拍 (*san1 pai1* = three-beats = triple time): one 重拍 (*zhong4 pai1* = heavy-beat), 二輕拍 (*er4 qing1 pai1* = two-light-beats).

by Diana Yue