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 lullabies

搖
Putonghua pronunciation: yao2
Cantonese pronunciation: yiu1
Meaning: Sway, swerve, shake, row, rock

搖 (radical 手 = hand, shou3, hand) means 搖動 (yao2 dong4 = shake/sway-move): 搖頭 (yao2 tou2 = shake-head), 搖船 (yao2 chuan2 = row-boat).

Classical pianist 搖身一變 (yao2 shen1 yi1 bian4 = turn-body-one-change = turns himself into) 搖滾樂 (yao2 gun3 yue4 = rock
call=roll-music) singer, 搖錢樹 (yao2 qian2 shu4 = shake-money-
tree = winner of big bucks).

Mom rocks 搖籃 (yao2 lan2 = rocking-basket/cradle), sings 搖籃曲 (yao2 lan2 qiu3 = cradle-song/lullaby): 搖搖, 搖到外婆橋
(yao2 yao2, yao2 dao4 wai4 po2 qiao2 = rock-rock, rock-to-
Grand-ma’s-bridge), 外婆叫我好寶寶, 給我一塊糕 (wai4 po2
jiao4 wo3 hao3 bao3 bao3, gei2 wo3 yi1 kuai4 gao1 =
Grand-ma-calls-me-good-Ba-by, gives-me-a-piece-of-cake).

by Diana Yue