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

舞
Putonghua pronunciation: wu3
Cantonese pronunciation: mo5
Meanings: dance, wield, wave, manipulate

舞 (radical 舟 chuan3, feet oppositely faced) means dance/wave:

舞蹈 (wu3 dao3 = dance-step = dance/dancing), 揮舞 (hu1 wu3 = wave-wield = wave) hankie/flag. 手舞足蹈 (shou3 wu3 zhu1 dao4 = hands-wave-feet-dance/swing) = gestures of excitement. Swordsman/dancer 舞劍 (wu3 jian4 = waves-sword = does fancy gestures with sword).

舞者 (wu3 zhe3 = dancers) perform 芭蕾舞 (ba1 lei2 wu3 = “ballet”-transliterated-dance), 探戈 (tan4 ge1 = “tango”-transliterated), 踢踏舞 (ti1 ta1 wu3 = “tap”-transliterated-dance). 社交舞 (she4 jiao1 wu3 = social-intercourse-dance) = social dancing.

Socialites love 舞會 (wu3 hui4 = dance-meet = balls). 跳華爾滋 (tiao4 hua2 er3 zil1 = jump-“waltz”-transliterated = waltzing) requires曼妙舞姿 (man4 mia4 wu3 zil1 = graceful/prolonged-wonderful-dance-posture-) = unhurried/elegant dance-movements.

by Diana Yue