Character Builder

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 The Water Margin

浪
Putonghua pronunciation: lang4
Cantonese pronunciation: long6
Meanings: waves, surf

浪 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) = 波浪 (bo1 lang4 = waves-waves). 海浪 (hai3 lang4 = sea-waves) have 浪花 (lang4 hua1 = wave-flower = spray).

衝浪 (chong1 lang4 = rush-waves) = surfing. 浪潮 (lang4 chao2 = wave-tide) = tide/surge or social trend. 無風不起浪 (wu2 feng1 bu4 qi3 lang4 = no-wind-won’t-rise-wave) means “There’s got to be a reason!”

浪漫 (lan4g man4 = wave/unrestrained-overflow) = “romantic”-transliterated. Tramps 流浪 (liu2 lang4 = flow-unrestrained = drift around). Among bandits of The Water Margin, 燕青 (Yan4 Qing1) was nicknamed 浪子 (lang4 zi3 = unrestrained-son/young-man = drifter/roamer), 張順 (Zhang1 Shun4) was nicknamed 浪裡白條 (lang4 li3 bai2 tiao2 = waves-in-white-line = white/naked figure in waves = adept/clever swimmer).

by Diana Yue