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 mahjong

搓
Putonghua pronunciation: cu0
Cantonese pronunciation: choh1
Meanings: rub, massage, knead

搓 (radical 手 shou3, hand) means 搓揉 (cu0 rou2 = rub-rubbing). Body massage includes 搓腰 (cu0 yao1 = rubbing/massaging-waist), 搓背 (cu0 bei4 = rubbing/massaging-back).

Baker 搓面团 (cu0 mian4 тuan2 = rub-noodle-ball = rolls/kneads dough), 搓來搓去 (cu0 lai2 cu0 qü4 = rub/roll-come-rub/roll-go = roll/knead back and forth). Impatient person 搓手頓足 (cu0 shou3 dun4 zu2 = rubs-hands-stamps-feet), leisurely person 輕搓慢捲 (qing1 cu0 mian4 nian3 = lightly-rub-slowly-twist = acts with deliberate slowness).

打麻将 (da3 ma2 jiang4 = hit/eject-mahjong = playing mahjong) is also called 搓麻将 (cu0 ma2 jiang4 = rubbing-mahjong) or 搓牌 (cu0 pai2 = rubbing-tiles), 搓 meaning pushing/stirring tiles into disarray before piling them into “four-sided citadel” for next game.

by Diana Yue