

Character Builder 您好學嗎？

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 Ebola

Putonghua pronunciation: *ran3*
Cantonese pronunciation: *yim5*
Meaning: stain, dye, catch

染 (radical 氵 = 水 *shui3*, water) means dye/stain/pollute: 染色 (*ran3 se1* = stain/dye-with-colorant), 染布 (*ran3 bu4* = dye-cloth), 染料 (*ran3 liao4* = dye-stuffs/agents). 一塵不染 (*yi1 chen2 bu4 ran3* = one-dust-not-stained) describes spotlessly-clean surface.

染病 (*ran3 bing4* = stain-ill) = contract illness. 染毒癮 (*ran3 du2 yin3* = stain-poison-addiction) = addicted to dangerous drugs. Drinking 污染 (*wu1 ran3* = dirty-polluted/contaminated) water makes people 染上 (*ran3 shang4* = stain-upon = catch) 傳染病 (*chuan2 ran3 bing4* = pass-on-stain-disease = transmissible/infectious diseases).

Medics touching 受感染 (*shou4 gan3 ran3* = are-affected-stained = infected) patients may 染上 (*ran3 shang4* = stain-upon = catch) 埃博拉病毒 (*ai1 bo2 la1 bing4 du2* = "Ebola"-transliterated-disease-poison = Ebola virus).

by Diana Yue