

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 washing

洗

Putonghua pronunciation: *xi3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sai2*

Meanings: wash, cleanse, purge

洗 = wash/clean: 洗臉 (*xi3 lian3* = wash~face), 洗澡 (*xi3 zao3* = wash~bath = take bath/shower), 洗地 (*xi3 di4* = wash/mop floor). Old Chinese migrants 洗碗 (*xi3 wan3* = wash~bowls = washed dishes) in restaurants, 洗衣店 (*xi3 yi1 dian4* = wash~clothes~stores = laundries).

Gangsters 洗劫 (*xi3 jie2* = wash~rob = take everything from) banks/shops, 洗錢 (*xi3 qian2* = wash~money = launder money). Oppressed people 一貧如洗 (*yi1 pin2 ru2 xi3* = one~poverty~resemble~washed = own nothing).

Penitent thief 洗手不幹 (*xi3 shou3 bu4 gan4* = wash~hands~no~do = quits trade/activity), 洗心革面 (*xi3 xin1 ge2 mian4* = wash/purge~heart~change~face = turns over a new leaf), converts to Christianity, receives 洗禮 (*xi3 li3* = wash~ceremony = baptism).