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 spring cleaning

淤
Putonghua pronunciation: zi4
Cantonese pronunciation: ji3
Meanings: steep, soak, stain, soil, sludge, pickle


水淤 (shui3 zi4 = water-stain), 油淤 (you2 zi4 = oil-stain), 茶淤 (cha2 zi4 = tea-stain), 咖啡淤 (ka1 fei1 zi4 = “coffee”-transliter rated-stain) are 污淤 (wu1 zi4 = dirty-stains). Housewife uses 去淤剂 (qū zi4 ji1 = go/remove-stain-solution = stain remover) to remove 汩痕 (zi4 hen2 = stain-trace/marks).

Chef 醃渍 (yan1 zi4 = marinate-soak) meat before stewing, 浸渍 (jin4 zi4 = immerse-soak) vegetables to make pickles. Japanese kanji term 漬物 (zi4 wu4 = stain-object = tsukemono) = pickles. 酒渍 (jiu3 zi4 = wine/liqueur-soaked) cherries are delicious.

by Diana Yue