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 removing obstacles

掃
Putonghua pronunciation: sao3
Cantonese pronunciation: so3
Meaning: brush, sweep, broom, clean up, eliminate

掃 (radical 手 = hand) means brush/sweep-away: 掃描 (sao3 chan2 = brush-away-dust), 掃眉 (sao3 mei2 = brush/paint-eye-brows), 掃帚 (sao3 zhou3 = sweeping-broom).
Cleaner 掃地 (sao3 di4 = sweeps-the-floor). Intruders get 掃地出門 (sao3 di4 chu1 men2 = sweep-floor-exit-door = kicked out). 掃描 (sao3 miao2 = sweep-sketch) = CT scan.

Chinese 掃墓 (sao3 mu4 = sweep-grave = visit/clean ancestors’ graves) annually. Rain makes picnickers 掃興 (sao3 xing4 = sweep-away-mood = disappointed).


by Diana Yue