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

Putonghua pronunciation: wu1
Cantonese pronunciation: woo1
Meanings: dirt, dirty, stain, smear

Character 污 has radical 亷 (= 水, shui3 = water): 污水 (wu1 shui3 = dirty-water), 污渍 (wu1 zi4 = dirty-stains). Slanderer uses 污言穢語 (wu1 yan2 hui4 yu3 = dirty-words-dirty-speech) to 污辱 (wu1 ru3 = dirt-insult = smear) opponent.

血污 (xue3 wu1 = blood-dirt = messy blood stains) cover murder-victim’s body. 污染 (wu1 ran3 = dirt-stain) = pollute/pollution. Factories pay 排污費 (pai2 wu1 fei4 = expel-dirt-fee = sewage charge).

貪污 (tan1 wu1 = greed-dirty) = corruption. Greedy parties 同流合污 (tong2 liu2 he2 wu1 = same-flow/river-combine-dirty/corrupt = collude to commit illegal acts). 出污泥而不染 (chu1 wu1 ni2 er2 bu4 ran3 = emerge-dirty-soil-and-not-stained) praises virtuous/righteous persons unstained by their lowly/shady origin.

by Diana Yue