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 baths and showers

Putonghua pronunciation: luo3
Cantonese pronunciation: loh2
Meanings: naked, nude, uncovered, exposed, bare, undress, strip, nudity

Ideogram 裸 (彀 = 衣 yī, clothes + 果 guǒ, fruit) suggests loin-cloth barely covering body’s fruit/lump-like parts (breasts, genitals). 裸体 (luō3 tiē3 = naked-body) = nude/nudity. Porn star 裸胸 (luō3 xióng1 = bares-chest/breasts). 裸泳 (luō3 yǒng3 = naked-swim), 裸跑 (luō3 pāo3 = nude-run/jog) mean swimming/jogging without clothes on.


裸 generates vivid contemporary expressions. 裸婚 (luō3 hun1 = naked-wed/marry) means getting married frugally without banquet/dowry/house-purchase. Anti-corruption investigations target 裸官 (luō3 guān1 = naked-bureaucrat = government bureaucrats who keep entire family and assets abroad).

by Diana Yue