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

浴
Putonghua pronunciation: yū4
Cantonese pronunciation: yuk6
Meanings: bathe, bath, wash, cover

Ideogram 浴 (water-drops + 人 ren2, person + 口 kou3, container/tub) means bathe/cover: 浴室 (yū4 shì1 = bath-room), 浴缸 (yū4 gang1 = bath-tub), 淋浴 (lín2 yū4 = pour-bath = shower), 海浴 (hai3 yū4 = sea-bathing), 日光浴 (rì4 guāng1 yū4 = sun-light-bath = sun-bathing), 蒸氣浴 (zhēng1 qì4 yū4 = steam-air-bath = steam-bath/sauna). 浴血 (yū4 xūe3 = bathe-in-blood) = engage in bloody/fierce fighting.

沐浴 (mu4 yū4 = wash-hair-wash) = 洗澡 (xi3 zào3 = wash-bathe). Chinese 澡堂 (zào3 tāng2 = bath-hall) are public bathhouses. Emperor watches 貴妃出浴 (guì4 fēi1 chū1 yū4 = sexy royal-concubine-bathe-herself in extravagant pool).

On 浴佛節 (yū4 fó2 jí2 = bathe-Buddha-festival, i.e. Buddha’s Birthday) Buddhists put perfume on statues of Buddha.

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