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: chong1
Cantonese pronunciation: chung1
Meanings: rinse, splash, flush, wash away

Pronunciation of 冲 resembles sound of rushing water (CHONG1!) — 飛沖天 (yì fei chong1 tian1 = one-fly-rush-to-sky) describes spectacular soaring bird/plane. Floods 冲走 (chong1 zou3 = wash-away) vegetation/houses, 冲散 (chong1 san4 = wash-separate = uproot/disperse) crowds.

冲 means splash/plunge water/liquid on something: 冲洗 (chong1 xi3 = rinse-wash) hair; 冲茶 (chong1 cha2 = splash-tea = seep/brew tea leaves in boiling water); 冲厕 (chong1 ce4 = flush-toilet). 冲膠卷 (chong1 jiao1 juan4 = rinse-plastic-roll) = develop film. Medicinal 冲劑 (chong1 ji4 = pour-dose = powdered medicine stirred/melted in hot water and then taken) is convenient for busy people.

Gentle, un-ambitious people are described as 冲和 (chong1 he2 = wash-harmonious = mild), 冲虚 (chong1 xu1 = wash-empty = humble/modest).

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