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

**洗**
Putonghua pronunciation: xi3
Cantonese pronunciation: sai2
Meanings: wash, cleanse, purge

洗 = wash/clean: 洗臉 (xi3 lian3 = wash-face), 洗澡 (xi3 zao3 = wash-bath = take bath/shower), 洗地 (xi3 di4 = wash/mop floor). Old Chinese migrants洗碗 (xi3 wan3 = wash-bowls = washed dishes) in restaurants, 洗衣店 (xi3 yi1 dian4 = wash-clothes-stores = laundries).

Gangsters 洗劫 (xi3 jie2 = wash-rob = take everything from) banks/shops, 洗錢 (xi3 qian2 = wash-money = launder money). Oppressed people 一貧如洗 (yi1 pin2 ru2 xi3 = one-poverty-resemble-washed = own nothing).

Penitent thief 洗手不幹 (xi3 shou3 bu4 gan4 = wash-hands-no-do = quits trade/activity), 洗心革面 (xi3 xin1 ge2 mian4 = wash/purge-heart-change-face = turns over a new leaf), converts to Christianity, receives 洗禮 (xi3 li3 = wash-ceremony = baptism).

by Diana Yue