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 zis 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

淨
Putonghua pronunciation: jing4
Cantonese pronunciation: jeng6
Meanings: clean


淨 has euphemistic meaning: 淨手 (jing4 shou3 = clean-hands = peeing), 淨身 (jing4 shen1 = clean-body = eunuch’s castration). 不乾淨 (bu4 gan1 jing4 = not-dry-clean = unclean/dirty) also means haunted by ghosts.

Taoism preaches 清淨無為 (qing1 jing4 wu2 wei2 = pure-clean-no-action = undisturbed meditation, non-action). Buddhist term 西方淨土 (xi1 fang1 jing4 tu3 = west-direction-clean-earth) = the Pure Land of the West, where reincarnated souls go.

by Diana Yue