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 winter clothes

洗 (xi3)
Pronunciation: Putonghua pronunciation: xi3
Cantonese pronunciation: sai2
Meanings: wash, cleanse

洗 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) = 洗淨 (xi3 jing4 = wash-clean): 洗臉 (xi3 lian3 = wash-face), 洗手 (xi3 shou3 = wash-hands), 洗澡 (xi3 zao3 = wash-bash = take bath/shower), 洗菜 (xi3 cai4 = wash-vegetables = wash cooking ingredients), 洗碗 (xi3 wan3 = wash-bowls = wash used dishes).

Robbers 洗劫 (xi3 jie2 = wash-rob = rob/clean out) bank. Mafia 洗錢 (xi3 qian2 = wash-money = launder money). Christian priest performs 洗禮 (xi3 li3 = wash-ceremony = baby’s christening or new convert’s baptism).

Housewife uses 洗衣機 (xi3 yi1 ji1 = wash-clothes-machine = washer). Woollen clothes need 乾洗 (gan1 xi3 = dry-cleaning). 自助洗衣房 (zi4 zhu4 xi3 yi1 fang2 = self-help-wash-clothes-room) = self-service laundry (Laundromat/launderette).

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