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:

1. **1st tone:** 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2. **2nd tone:** 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3. **3rd tone:** 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4. **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.

**Radical 黒 hei1 = black**

Putonghua pronunciation: mo 4
Cantonese pronunciation: mak 6

Meanings: ink

墨 means ink, also extent/level of someone’s reading/education. 胸無點墨 (xiong1 wu2 dian3 mo4 = chest-hasn’t-dot-of-ink) = poorly read/educated. 滿肚墨水 (man3 du4 mo4 shui3 = full-stomach-ink-solution) = well-read/erudite.

Artists compose 水墨畫 (shui3 mo4 hua4 = water-ink-painting) in 焦墨 (jiao1 mo4 = charred-ink = near-solid black ink), 濃墨 (nong2 mo4 = dense-ink-solution), 淡墨 (dan4 mo4 = pale/thin-ink-solution), 漲墨 (po1 mo4 = splash-ink = ink splashes). Water-and-ink painting, although monochrome, is not monotonous, because “墨有五彩” (mo4 you3 wu2 cai3 = ink-has-five-hues = ink displays various iridescent shades).

Essayists/poets 舞文弄墨 (wu3 wen2 nong4 mo4 = dance/wave-words-play-ink = practice/show-off literary skills). Museums display 墨寶 (mo4 bao3 = ink-treasures = calligraphy/painting/handwriting by famous artists/celebrities).