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 fame and notoriety

名
Putonghua pronunciation: ming2
Cantonese pronunciation: ming4
Meaning: name, fame

名 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) means 名字 (ming2 zi4 = name-style-name): 人名 (ren2 ming2 = person’s-name), 地名 (di4 ming2 = place-name), 名詞 (ming2 ci2 = name-term) = noun.

New-born baby needs 起名 (qi2 ming2 = to-be-given-name).

Shower-party’s 名單 (ming2 dan1 = name-list) has guests’ 姓名 (xing4 ming2 = surname-name = full names).

Philanthropist wins 美名 (mei3 ming2 = beautiful/good/praise-worthy-name), 實至名歸 (shi2 zhi4 ming2 gui1 = reality-arrive-name-return = really deserves fame/praise). 名氣界 (ming2 qi4 jie4 = name-air/gas-area = celebrities circle) love 名牌 (ming2 pai2 = famous-brand-names), 浮名 (fu2 ming2 = floating-name = vanity).

Hermit 隱姓埋名 (yin3 xing4 mai2 ming2 = vanish-surname-cover-name = lives incognito), discards 虛名 (xu1 ming2 = empty-fame).

by Diana Yue