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

Putonghua pronunciation: ma4
Cantonese pronunciation: ma6
Meaning: abuse, scold, attack, verbally, condemn, curse

罵 (radical 马 ma3, horse + 囤 xuan1, cacaphony) = 罪人 (ma4 ren2 = scold/curse-someone): 贬罵 (ze2 ma4 = blame-scold), 痛罵 (tong4 ma4 = vehemently-condemn), 咒罵 (zou4 ma4 = curse-abuse). Quarrelling couple 對罵 (dui4 ma4 = opposite-abuse = shout at each other).


Hero earns 美名 (mei3 ming2 = beautiful/honorable-name). Traitor earns 罵名 (ma4 ming2 = cursed-name = notorious/infamous name). Weaklings/cynics 笑罵由人 (xiao4 ma4 you2 ren2 = laugh-abuse-let-others = tolerate others' taunting/jeers/abuses).