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: chou4
Cantonese pronunciation: chau3
Meaning: stink, rank, odor, rotten, repulsive, nasty, abhorrent

臭 (自 zi4, self/nose + 犬 qüan3, dog) suggests dog sniffing 臭味 (chou4 wei4 = stinking-smell). Rubbish-bin 臭氣薰天下 (chou4 qi4 xün1 tian1 = stinking-gas-smoke-sky = smells horrible).
Deceased’s 臭皮囊 (chou4 pi2 nang2 = stinking-skin-bag = body) emits 屍臭 (si1 chou4 = corpse’s-rotting-odor).

臭蟲 (chou4 chong2 = stinking-worm/bug) = bed-bug. 臭氧層 (chou4 yang3 ceng2 = stinking-oxygen-layer) = ozone-layer.
Red Guards 臭罵 (chou4 ma4 = fiercely-condemned) 臭老九 (chou4 lao3 jiu3 = stinking-old-nine = intellectuals): “臭美!” (chou4 mei3 = stinking-prettty = “Smug/conceited/show-off!”)

Snob having 臭錢 (chou4 qian2 = stinking-money) shows 臭架子 (chou4 jia4 zi0 = stinking-rack-diminutive = nasty-air/ways), 臭名遠播 (chou4 ming2 yüan3 bo4 = stinking/dirty-name-far-spread = is notorious far-and-wide).

by Diana Yue