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 the ugly duckling

Putonghua pronunciation: chou3
Cantonese pronunciation: chau2
Meanings: ugly, unsightly, shameful, undignified, unpleasant, grotesque, disgusting

醜 (radical 鬼 gui3, ghost) describes ugly appearance/nature, is opposite of 美 (mei3, beauty/beautiful). 醜怪 (chou3 ba1 guai4 = ugly-eight-odd) = ugly-looking person/creature. 醜陋 (chou3 lou4 = ugly-shabby/unpresentable) describes ugly/ignoble people/behavior.

醜 gave meaning to 丑角 (chou3 jüe2 = clown-role) in drama.
Political clowns 醜態百出 (chou3 tai4 bai2 chu1 = ugly-gestures/attitudes-hundred-out = put on revolting show). 醜婦終須見家翁 (chou3 fu3 zhong1 xü1 jian4 jia1 weng1 = ugly-bride-finally-must-see-father-in-law) = unpleasant facts must face scrutiny.

Reality is often 醜惡 (chou3 e4 = ugly/grotesque-bad/evil).
Tabloids print 醜聞 (chou3 wen2 = dirty-news/scandals) about child-molesters’ 醜事 (chou3 shi4 = ugly-event = shameful/dirty affairs/acts/dealings). Readers exclaim: 醜死了! (chou3 si3 le0 = ugly-to-death-ed = How shameful/disgusting!)

by Diana Yue