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 \ 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 scandals

盖 (Putonghua pronunciation: gai4)  
Cantonese pronunciation: goi3  
Meaning: hide, lid, cover, build, surpass, stamp, press, build

盖 (radical 盖 he2, empty container) means lid/cover/build: jar's 盖子 (gai4 zi0 = lid-diminutive = lid/cover), shed's 上盖 (shang4 gai4 = top-cover/roof), 蓋房 (gai4 fang2 = erect house/building), 蓋章 (gai4 zhang1 = stamp-seal). Noises 蓋過 (gai4 guo4 = cover-over) conversation. 蓋頭 (gai4 tou2 = cover-head) = Mongolian girl/bride’s red veil.

蓋棺論定 (gai4 guan1 lun4 ding4 = cover-coffin-comment-settle = posthumous assessment of person's life/opus): Napoleon 武功盖世 (wu3 gong1 gai4 shi4 = military-achievements-cover-world = made unparalleled military conquests). However, 蓋世太保 (gai4 shi4 tai4 bao3 = cover-world-ancient-Chinese-official-title) is “Gestapo” transliterated.

VIP tries 掩盖 (yan3 gai4 = concealing-covering-up) misconduct, but 欲盖弥彰 (yu4 gai4 mi2 zhang1 = desire-cover-up-more-manifest = hiding it only magnifies it).

by Diana Yue