

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 hawkers

牌

Putonghua pronunciation: *pai 2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *paai 4*

Meanings: card, plate, plaque, license, brand

牌 are stiff/solid, rectangular objects: 紙牌 (*zhi3 pai2* = paper-card = playing-cards), 門牌 (*men2 pai2* = door-plate), shop's 招牌 (*zhao1 pai2* = wave/attract-board = signboard), car's 車牌 (*che1 pai2* = vehicle-license or car-plate), athlete's 金牌 (*jin1 pai2* = gold-plate/award).

Businesses need 牌照 (*pai2 zhao4* = card/license-evidence = licenses). Bars/restaurants need 酒牌 (*jiu3 pai2* = liquor-license). 無牌小販 (*wu2 pai2 xiao3 fan4* = have-not-license-small-sell = unlicensed hawkers) cannot 做生意 (*zuo4 sheng1 yi4* = do-life-meaning = do livelihood = do business).

Chanel, Dior are 名牌 (*ming2 pai2* = name/fame-brand = famous brands). 冒牌貨 (*mao4 pai2 huo4* = pretend-brand-commodity) = faked/pirated goods. 大牌 (*da4 pai2* = big-card) means ace or big shot, also describes haughty, standoffish persons.

by Diana Yue