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

販
Putonghua pronunciation: fan 4
Cantonese pronunciation: faan 3
Meanings: selling, hawking, hawker

販 = 賣 (mai4) = sell. 小販 (xiao3 fan4 = small-seller) = hawker: 報販 (bao4 fan4 = newspaper-vendor), 魚販 (yu2 fan4 = fish-monger). 戰爭販子 (zhan4 zheng1 fan4 zi3 = war-conflict-sell-er) are warmongers. 賣毒 (fan4 du2 = hawk/sell-poison = trafficking dangerous drugs), 賣賣人口 (fan4 mai4 ren2 kou3 = hawk-sell-persons-mouths = white slavery) are criminal offences.

販夫走卒 (fan4 fu1 zou3 zu2 = sell-man-run-pawn = hawkers, messengers etc.) means lower class workers collectively.

Hawkers display goods on 攤子 (tan1 zi3 = display-stand-diminutive = mini-stands), 叫賣 (jiao4 mai4 = call-sell = yell “Come buy!”) Seeing 警察 (jing3 cha2 = warn-inspect = police), unlicensed hawkers 走鬼 (zou2 gui3 = Cantonese jau2 gwai2 = run/flee-ghost = flee police).

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