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

档
Putonghua pronunciation: dang 4
Cantonese pronunciation: dong 2
Meanings: shelf, archive, stall, level

档 (radical 木 mu4, wood) means wooden shelf: 檔案 (dang4 an4 = shelf-table = files/archives), 存檔 (cun2 dang4 = keeping-files). 檔 also means wooden stand. 大牌檔 (da4 pai2 dang4 = Cantonese daai6 paa14 dong2 = big-plaque-stalls) = cooked food stalls. Wet markets have 雞檔 (ji1 dang4 = chicken-stalls), 菜檔 (cai4 dang4 = vegetable-stalls). 賭檔 (du3 dang4 = gambling-stalls), 大檔 (da4 dang4 = Cantonese daai6 dong2) are illegal gambling dens.

高檔貨 (gao1 dang4 huo4 = high-shelf-goods) = high-end goods, 低檔貨 (di1 dang4 huo4 = low-shelf-goods) = low-end goods. 開檔 (kai1 dang4 = open-stall) means opening shop or start a business. 收檔 (shou1 dang4 = close-stall) means closing shop or telling somebody to “Go to hell!”

by Diana Yue