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: paa1 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 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