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 shopping malls

店
Putonghua pronunciation: dian4
Cantonese pronunciation: dim3
Meanings: shop

店主 (dian4 zhu3 = shop-owners) open 商店 (shang1 dian4 = commerce-shop = shops): 飯店 (fan4 dian4 = cooked-rice-shop = eateries/restaurants), 書店 (shu1 dian4 = book-stores), 藥店 (yao4 dian4 = drug-stores), hire 店員 (dian4 yuan2 = shop-member = shopkeepers).

Shoppers visit 商場 (shang1 chang3 = commerce-field = malls), 購物 (gou4 wu4 = buy-things), 血拚 (xue4 pin1 = blood-fight = "shopping"-transliterated = buy like crazy).

名店 (ming2 dian4 = name/famous-shop = brand-name stores) sometimes 店大欺客 (dian4 da4 qi1 ke4 = shop-big-bully-guest = treat customers snobbishly), 黑店 (hei1 dian4 = black-shop) means 旅店 (lu3 dian4 = travel-shop = inn) that 謀財害命 (mou2 cai2 hai4 ming4 = plot-money-harm-life = rob/kill customers), or shop that cheats/over-charges.

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