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

旺
Putonghua pronunciation: wang 4
Cantonese pronunciation: wong 6
Meanings: robust, prosperous

旺 (日 re4, sun + 王 wang2, king) indicates high heat/prosperity. 爐火正旺 (lu2 huo3 zheng4 wang4 = furnace-fire-right-now-hot/intense) describes a blazing furnace. 生意興旺 (sheng1 yi4 xing1 wang4 = livelihood-rise-robust) means doing good business. 旺季 (wang4 ji4 = robust-season) means high-yielding business seasons, e.g. Christmas. 旺舖 (wang4 pu4 = robust-shop) means shop flooded with customers/business. Hawkers concentrate in 旺區 (wang4 qu1 = busy-districts). 旺舖 (wang4 xiao1 = robust-sell) describes hot sale items.

Match-makers recommend brides who can 旺夫益子 (wang4 fu1 yi1 zi3 = prosper-husband-benefit-sons = help husband/sons achieve success/prosperity). Feng-shui masters recommend properties which can 旺丁 (wang4 ding1 = prosper-sons = increase inhabitants’ male offsprings), 旺財 (wang4 cai2 = prosper-wealth = increase inhabitants’ wealth).

by Diana Yue