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

窗
Putonghua pronunciation: chuang1
Cantonese pronunciation: cheung4
Meanings: window

窗 = 窗子 (chuang1 zi0 = window-diminutive) has 窗框 (chuang1 kuang1 = window-frame), 玻璃 (bo1 li2 = glass), 窗台 (chuang1 tai2 = window-sill). Air/wind passes through 窗戶 (chuang1 hu4 = window-door = window-opening).

Shops have 櫥窗 (chu2 chuang1 = cabinet-window) = display windows. 櫥窗設計 (chu2 chuang1 she4 ji4 = cabinet-window-instal-plan = window-display/dressing) uses 人形 (ren2 xing2 = human-form = mannequins), 燈飾 (deng1 shi4 = lamp-decorate = lighting). 看櫥窗 (kan4 chu2 chuang1 = look-at-shop-windows = window-shopping) is enjoyable.

窗口 (chuang1 kou3 = window-mouth) means window-opening or town displaying/exporting hinterland’s produce/image. 打開天窗說亮話 (da3 kai1 tian1 chuang1 shuo4 liang4 hua4 = hit-open-sky-window-speak-lit-up-words = open skylight, talk openly) means “Frankly speaking...”

by Diana Yue