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

牌 Putonghua pronunciation: pai2
Cantonese pronunciation: paai4
Meanings: sign, label, brand

牌 are stiff rectangles showing information/authorization: 門牌 (men2 pai2 = door-plate), 路牌 (lu4 pai2 = road-sign), 車牌 (che1 pai2 = vehicle-license or car-plate), 紙牌 (zhi3 pai2 = paper-card = playing-cards).

Shops display 招牌 (zhao1 pai2 = wave/attract-board = signboards). Consumers compare different 牌子 (pai2 zi0 = label-diminutive = brands), boycott 冒牌貨 (mao4 pai2 huo4 = pretend-brand-commodity = faked/pirated goods).

Manufacturers use 宣傳 (xuan1 chuan2 = broadcast-send = propaganda) to promote 品牌 (pin3 pai2 = class-label = quality brands), award prizes to 金牌推銷員 (jin1 pai2 tu1 xiao1 yuan2 = gold-medal-push-sale-member = top salesmen).

Brilliant marketing transforms 老牌 (lao3 pai2 = old-sign = old labels/brands) into 名牌 (ming2 pai2 = name/famous-plate = famous brand-names).

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