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 \ 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

Putonghua pronunciation: mai3
Cantonese pronunciation: maai5
Meanings: buy

買 (mai4, sell), 貨 (huo4, commodity) all have radical 貝 (bei4, seashell = money). 買方 (mai3 fang1 = buy-side/party = buyer) purchases 貨物 (huo4 wu4 = commodity-thing = commodities) from 賣方 (mai4 fang1 = sell-side/party = seller).

Businessmen 做買賣 (zuo4 mai3 mai4 = do-buy-sell = make deals/transactions). Shoppers 買東西 (mai3 dong1 xi3 = buy-east-west = buy things). Big sales offer “買一送一!” (mai3 yi1 song4 yi1 = buy-one-give-one = “Buy one, get one free!”)

Men go out to 買醉 (mai3 zui4 = buy-drunken = buy drinks, get drunk), 買笑 (mai3 xiao4 = buy-smile = pay whores for sex). 買官 (mai3 guan1 = buy-bureaucrat = paying graft to obtain official appointment) is corrupt practice.

by Diana Yue