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

坐 (zuò)
Cantonese pronunciation: joh⁴
Meanings: sit, ride

坐 means sit (“請坐!” = qìng³ zuò⁴ = “Please-sit-down!”), ride (坐車 = zuò⁴ che¹ = ride-car). 座位 (zuò⁴ wei⁴ = seat-place) = seat.

Shoppers 坐下 (zuò⁴ xia⁴ = sit-down) in 咖啡店 (ka¹ fei¹ dian⁴ = “coffee”-transliterated-shop = café/coffee-shop) for 下午茶 (xìa⁴ wu³ cha² = low-noon-tea = afternoon tea), admire ladies’ 坐姿 (zuò⁴ zī¹ = sitting-postures), sigh: “偷得浮生半日閒!” (tōu¹ de² fu² shēng¹ bái³ rì⁴ leí¹ shí = steal-acquire-floating-life-half-day-leisure = “Snatch a short break!”)

坐視不理 (zuò⁴ shì¹ bu⁴ li³ = sit-watch-no-heed) means turning a blind eye on problem/trouble. Unemployed people worry about 坐食山崩 (zuò⁴ shí² shān¹ bēng¹ = sit-eat-mountain-collapse = using up all savings).

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