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 ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement)

商
Putonghua pronunciation: shang1
Cantonese pronunciation: seung1
Meanings: commerce, businessman

工商業 (gong1 shang1 ye4 = industry-commerce-professions = industries and commerce) sustain economy. 商人 (shang1 ren2 = commerce-person = businessmen/merchants) include 製造商 (zhi4 zao4 shang1 = make-create-businessmen = manufacturers), 批發商 (pi1 fa1 shang1 = bulk-distribute-businessmen = wholesalers), 零售商 (ling2 shou4 shang1 = piece-sell-businessmen = retailers).

台商 (ta1i2 shang1 = Taiwan-businessmen) 設廠 (she2 chang3 = set-up-factories), open 商場 (shang1 chang3 = commerce-field = malls), find 商機 (shang1 ji1 = business-opportunities) in Mainland China.

Idiomatic expression 長袖善舞 (chang2 xiu4 shan4 wu3 = long-sleeves-good-at-dancing) describes business magnates. 儒商 (ru2 shang1 = scholar-businessman) means businessman with refined/intellectual tastes. Business losers sneer: “無商不奸!” (wu2 shang1 bu4 jian1 = no-businessman-not-wicked = “All businessmen cheat!”)

by Diana Yue