

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 pearls

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhen1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jan1*

Meanings: rare, precious, valuable, treasure, treasured

珍 (radical 王 = 玉 *yü4*, jade) means 珍寶 (*zhen1 bao3* = valuable-treasure), 珍貴 (*zhen1 gui4* = rare/precious-elevated/valuable). 山珍海錯 (*shan1 zhen1 hai3 cuo4* = mountain-treasure-sea-resources) = valuable edibles from land and sea.

Graduate 珍惜 (*zhen1 xi1* = treasures-cares-about) first job. Departing friends say “珍重!” (*zhen1 zhong4* = value-importance = “Take care!”) Museums house 珍藏 (*zhen1 cang2* = valuable-collections), heavily insure 稀世奇珍 (*xi1 shi4 qi2 zhen1* = rare-in-world-unusual-treasure = rare treasures).

Women love 珍珠耳環 (*zhen1 zhu1 er3 huan2* = precious-pearls-ear-rings), 指環 (*zhi3 huan2* = finger-rings), 項鍊 (*xiang4 lian4* = neck-chain = necklaces). Beauticians recommend 珍珠膏 (*zhen1 zhu1 gao1* = precious-pearls-paste), 珍珠粉 (*zhen1 zhu1 fen3* = precious-pearls-powder) for skin-care.