

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

珠

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhu1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jue1*

Meanings: pearl, bead

珠 (radical 玉 *yü4*, jade) means 珍珠 (*zhen1 zhu1* = precious-pearl): 真珠 (*zhen1 zhu1* = real/natural-pearls), 養珠 (*yang3 zhu1* = cultured-pearls), nacre-coated 人造珠 (*ren2 zao4 zhu1* = man-made/artificial-pearls).

露珠 (*lu4 zhu1* = dew-drops), 淚珠 (*lei4 zhu1* = tear-drops) are 水珠 (*shui3 zhu1* = water-droplets). Chinese invented 算盤 (*shuan4 pan2* = calculation-panel = abacus with wooden beads), 珠算 (*zhu1 shuan4* = abacus-beads-calculation/arithmetics). 佛珠 (*fo2 zhu1* = Buddha-beads) on Buddhist prayer-necklace resemble Catholics' 唸珠 (*nian4 zhu1* = chant-prayer-beads = rosary beads).

珠寶 (*zhu1 bao3* = pearls-treasures) = jewels/jewelry. Although 珠光寶氣 (*zhu1 guang1 bao3 qi4* = pearls-aura-treasures-air = wearing glamorous jewels), aged woman looks 人老珠黃 (*ren2 lao3 zhu1 huang2* = person-old-pearl-yellow = faded/lusterless).

by Diana Yue