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

珍
Putonghua pronunciation: zhen1
Cantonese pronunciation: jan1
Meanings: rare, precious, valuable, treasure, treasured

珍 (radical 王 = 玉 yù4, 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 xī1 = treasures-cares-about) first job. Departing friends say “珍重!” (zhen1 zhòng4 = value-importance = “Take care!”) Museums house 珍藏 (zhen1 cāng2 = valuable-collections), heavily insure 稀世奇珍 (xī1 shì4 qi2 zhen1 = rare-in-world-unusual-treasure = rare treasures).

Women love 珍珠耳環 (zhen1 zhu1 ēr3 huan2 = precious-pearls-ear-rings), 指環 (zhǐ huan2 = finger-rings), 項鍊 (xiāng4 lián4 = neck-chain = necklaces). Beauticians recommend 珍珠膏 (zhen1 zhu1 gāo1 = precious-pearls-paste), 珍珠粉 (zhen1 zhu1 fēn3 = precious-pearls-powder) for skin-care.

by Diana Yue