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 precious stones

寶 (bào)

Putonghua pronunciation: bao3
Cantonese pronunciation: bo2
Meanings: treasure, precious


Mom kisses her 寶寶 (bào bāo = precious-precious = darling baby). 寶貝 (bào bèi = precious-mother-of-pearl = valuable object) also means parent/lover’s beloved darling. Virgin forests have 奇珍異寶 (qí zhēn yì bào = strange-jewels-alien-treasures = rare/fantastic plants/animals/resources etc). Fairies have 法寶 (fǎ bào = magic-power/weapons).

寶刀未老 (bào dāo wèi lǎo = precious-sword/knife-not-yet-old) praises art/skill/dexterity of aged veteran/specialist. Company’s 鎮山之寶 (zhèn shān zhī bǎo = weigh/guard-mountain-’s-treasure) means its most renowned brand/asset.

by Diana Yue