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

石
Putonghua pronunciation: shi2
Cantonese pronunciation: shek6
Meanings: stone

石 = 石頭 (shi2 tou2 = stone-head = stone). Women love 鑽石 (zuan4 shi2 = drill-stone = diamonds), 紅寶石 (hong2 bao3 shi2 = red-precious-stone = ruby), 藍寶石 (lan2 bao3 shi2 = blue-precious-stone = sapphire), 綠寶石 (lü4 bao3 shi2 = green-precious-stone = emerald).

Chinese appreciate 古玉 (gu3 yu4 = ancient-jade), 翡翠 (fei3 cui4 = red-jade-green-jade = jadeite). Architects/sculptors use 大理石 (da4 li3 shi2 = Dali-stone = stone mined in Dali, Yunnan Province = marble).


by Diana Yue