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

镶 has radical 金 (jin1, gold/metal). Dentist 镶牙 (xiang1 ya2 = set-tooth) = makes teeth’s filling/bridge. Lady’s blouse has lace 镶邊 (xiang1 bian1 = line-edge = hem).

Precious stones require 割切 (ge1 qie4 = slice-cut = cutting), 镶嵌 (xiang1 qian4 = set/cast-inlay = casting). Jeweler designs 指環 (zhi3 huan2 = finger-ring = rings/bands), 項鍊 (xiang4 lian3 = neck-chain = necklaces), 別針 (bie2 zhen1 = pin-needle = pins), sets gem-stones in 白金 (bai2 jin1 = white-gold = platinum), 十四k金 (shi2 si4 kei1 jin1 = ten-four-k-gold = 14 karat gold). Cartier jewelry has fine 镶工 (xiang1 gong1 = set/cast-workmanship = casting).

景泰藍 (jing3 tai4 lan2 = Ming-Dynasty-Emperor-Jingtai’s-reign-period-blue) = cloisonné-ware has blue/multi-color enamel body and gold/bronze-thread inlay.

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