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 antiques

銅 (radical 金 jin1, gold/metal) = 紅銅 (hong2 tong2 = red/pure-copper), 黃銅 (huang2 tong2 = yellow-copper = brass). 銅樂隊 (tong2 yue4 dui4 = brass-music-team) = brass band.

銅板 (tong2 ban3 = copper-flat-piece) = 銅錢 (tong2 bi4 = copper-money) = copper coin. 銅牆鐵壁 (tong2 qiang2 tie3 bi4 = bronze-walls-iron-walls) describes impenetrable building/vault.

Ancient Chinese 為銅 (lian4 tong2 = smelted-copper), added 銭 (xi1, tin), produced bronze. Old 銅鼎 (tong2 ding3 = bronze-tripods/dings), 銅鏡 (tong2 jing4 = bronze-mirrors), 銅劍 (tong2 jian4 = bronze-swords) develop 銅綠 (tong2 lü4 = bronze's-green-rust). Hence the Chinese terms 銅器 (qing1 tong2 qi4 = green-bronze-utensils = bronzes), 銅時代 (qing1 tong2 shi2 dai4 = bronze-time-period = the bronze age).

by Diana Yue