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 the underclass

貶
Putonghua pronunciation: jian4
Cantonese pronunciation: jin6
Meanings: cheap, low, debased, under-valued

Both having radical 貝 (bei4, sea-shells/money), 貴 (gui4, dear/valuable/high-status) are opposites: 貴價 (gui4 jia4 = high-price/worth), 責價 (jian4 jia4 = cheap-price/worth). Bankrupt tycoon 責賣 (jian4 mai4 = cheap-sell = slashes prices to sell) assets. 殖貶農 (gu3 jian4 shang1 nong2 = grains-cheap-hurt-farmers) means over-supply of grains is making prices plunge and harming crop-growers’ earnings.


Fundamentally, 人無分貴貶 (ren2 wu2 fen1 gui4 jian4 = people-not-divided-into-valuable-cheap = everyone is equal in value). However, India still has 責民 (jian4 min2 = cheap-masses = untouchables).

by Diana Yue