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 auctions

珍 (radical 王 wang2 = 玉 yu4 = jade) means rare/precious: 珍寶 (zhen1 bao3 = rare-treasures), 珍珠 (zhen1 zhu1 = precious-bead = pearl), 珍貴 (zhen1 gui4 = precious-expensive = valuable). Panda is 珍稀動物 (zhen1 xi1 dong4 wu4 = precious-rare-moving-thing = rare animal species).

We 珍惜 (zhen1 xi1 = treasure-love/care = care about) friends, say "珍重!" (zhen1 zhong4 = treasure-important = “Take care!”) when they depart. Decent person 珍惜羽毛 (zhen1 xi1 yu3 mao2 = treasure-care-for-plumage-feather = treasures his/her own plumage = wouldn’t do anything that would taint his/her own personality/reputation).

Auction houses play up 珍品 (zhen1 pin3 = valuable-items) from 故宮珍藏 (gu4 gong1 zhen1 cang2 = past/late-palace-precious-keep = Chinese Imperial Palace’s treasured collection).

by Diana Yue