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

Putonghua pronunciation: verb cang2, noun zang4
Cantonese pronunciation: chong4, jong6
Meanings: store, keep, hide, collection

藏 = hide/keep: 隱藏 (yin3 cang2 = conceal-hide), 藏書 (cang2 shu1 = gathered-books = library collection), 寶藏 (bao3 zang4 = treasure-collection = treasure). 藏身之處 (cang2 shen1 zhi1 chu4 = hide-body-’s-place) = person’s hiding place.

Auctions attract 臥虎藏龍 (wo4 hu3 cang2 long2 = lying-tigers-hiding-dragons = heroes/connoisseurs keeping low profile). 收藏家 (shou1 cang2 jia1 = gather-keep-master = collector) knows auctioned item’s 收藏史 (shou1 cang2 shi3 = gather-keep-history = provenance): 家藏 (jia1 cang2 = family-keep = heirloom), 館藏 (guan3 cang2 = house/museum-collection), 御藏 (yu4 cang2 = imperial-collection). 精藏 (jing1 cang2 = fine-collect) = collection’s fine items.

Mysterious buyer 深藏不露 (shen1 cang2 bu4 lu4 = deep-hide-no-reveal = doesn’t speak his mind, is unfathomable).

by Diana Yue