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 pearls

珠
Putonghua pronunciation: zhu1
Cantonese pronunciation: jue1
Meanings: pearl, bead

珠 (radical 玉 yù4, jade) means 珍珠 (zhen1 zhu1 = precious-pearl): 真珠 (zhen1 zhu1 = real/natural-pearls), 養珠 (yang3 zhu1 = cultured-pearls), nacre-coated 人造珠 (ren2 zao4 zhu1 = man-made/artificial-pearls).

露珠 (lu4 zhu1 = dew-drops), 淚珠 (lei1 zhu1 = tear-drops) are 水珠 (shui3 zhu1 = water-droplets). Chinese invented 算盤 (shuan4 pan2 = calculation-panel = abacus with wooden beads), 珠算 (zhu1 shuan4 = abacus-beads-calculation/arithmetic). 佛珠 (fo2 zhu1 = Buddha-beads) on Buddhist prayer-necklace resemble Catholics’ 唵珠 (nian4 zhu1 = chant-prayer-beads = rosary beads).

珠寶 (zhu1 bao3 = pearls-treasures) = jewels/jewelry. Although 珠光寶氣 (zhu1 guang1 bao3 qi4 = pearls-aura-treasures-air = wearing glamorous jewels), aged woman looks 人老珠黃 (ren2 lao3 zhu1 huang2 = person-old-pearl-yellow = faded/lusterless).

by Diana Yue