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

Putonghua pronunciation: bei4
Cantonese pronunciation: booi3
Meanings: mollusks, seashells, clam, pearl, oyster

貝 means 貝類 (bei4 lei4 = shellfish/mollusk-species) e.g. 蛤 (bang4 = 蛤蜊 ge2 li4 = clam), 牡蠣 (mu3 li4 = 蠔 hao2, oyster). 扇貝 (shan4 bei4 = fan-clam = scallop)'s dried meat is flavorsome 乾貝 (gan1 bei4 = conpoy = dry-mollusk/scallop). 珠貝 (zhu1 bei4 = pearl-molluscs) = clams/oysters which produce pearls. 貝母 (bei4 mu3 = shell-mother = mother-of-pearl = nacre) is iridescent inner lining of 貝殼 (bei4 ke2 = shell-crust/cover = seashells).

Ancient Chinese used seashells as currency, hence radical 貝 means wealth, e.g. 財寶 (cai2 bao3 = wealth-treasures). 寶貝 (bao3 bei4 = precious-seashell) means valuable gem/object, magical instrument or somebody’s darling. Ludwig van Beethoven’s name is transliterated into Chinese as 貝多芬 (bei4 duo1 fen1, literally “surname-Bei4-abundant-fragrance”).

by Diana Yue