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:

1. **1st tone:** 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2. **2nd tone:** 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3. **3rd tone:** 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4. **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 Buddha's sacrifice for eagle and dove

代
Putonghua pronunciation: dai4
Cantonese pronunciation: doi6
Meanings: represent, replace, substitute

代 = representative. National flag 代表 (dai4 biao3 = represent-mark = represents) country. 代理 (dai4 li3 = represent-handle = agent) handles affairs for client. Coup leader 取代 (qu3 dai4 = take-replace = replaces) deposed ruler.

代罪羔羊 (dai4 zui4 gao1 yang2 = substitute-sin/crime/fault-kid-lamb) = scapegoat. 代人受過 (dai4 ren2 shou4 guo4 = substitute-person/other-receive-mistake) means punished for another’s mistakes.

Buddhist story says highest god 因陀羅 (yin1 tuo2 luo2 = “Indra”-transliterated) became 鷹 (ying1, eagle), chased 鴻 (ge1, dove) to test 佛祖 (fo2 zu3 = Buddhism-ancestor = Buddha). Buddha measured dove’s weight on 秤 (cheng4, scales), 割肉 (ge1 rou4 = cut-flesh = cut his own flesh), 代替 (dai4 ti4 = replace/substitute) dove to 餵鷹 (wei4 ying1 = feed-eagle).

by Diana Yue