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 stockmarket gambling

Putonghua pronunciation: yüan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen4
Meanings: dollar

元 means origin/primary/principle. In springtime, 一元復始, 萬象更新 (yī yuán 2 fù 4 shí 3, wàn 4 xiàng 4 gèng 1 xīn 1 = one- primary-source-resume-begin, ten-thousand/all-aspects- change-new = the world begins a new cycle).

Money term 元 = homonym 圓 (yüan 2, circular coin): 銀元/圓 (yín 2 yuán 2 = silver-coin). 元 is generic term for currency: 美元 (Mei3 yuán 2 = A “me” - rican-transliterated-dollar = USD), 港元 (Gang3 yuán 2 = Hong- “Kong” - dollar = HKD), 日元 (Ri4 yuán 2 = 日本元 = Ri 2 bēn 3 yuán 2 = Japanese-yen = ¥ = JPY), 澳元 (Ao4 yuán 2 = “Au” stralian-transliterated-dollar = AUD). 元 ($ sign) is also currency unit: 十元 (shí 3 yuán 2 = 10-dollar-unit) = $10.


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