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 antiques

Putonghua pronunciation: qi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meaning: vessel, container, utensil, ware, instrument, appliance

器 (four 口 kou3, mouths/openings) means 器具 (qi4 jü4 = vessel-utensil): 樂器 (yue4 qi4 = musical-instrument), 兵器 (bing1 qi4 = army-utensil = weapon), 電器 (dian4 qi4 = electric-appliance), 儀器 (yi2 qi4 = gauge-apparatus). 器官 (qi4 guan1 = utensil-commander) = body organs: 生殖器 (sheng1 zhi2 qi4 = male/female reproductive-organ).

Ancients used 青銅器 (qing1 tong2 qi4 = green-bronze-vessels/utensils) as 禮器 (li3 qi4 = ritualistic-utensils), 容器 (rong2 qi4 = containers-vessels). Pyramids contain 冥器 (ming2 qi4 = netherworld/funerary-utensils).

陶瓷器 (tao2 ci2 qi4 = clay-porcelain-ware = ceramics)
production inspired idioms: 不成器 (bu4 cheng2 qi4 = not-formed-utensil = substandard/failed person), 大器晚成 (da4 qi4 wan3 cheng2 = big-utensil-late-formed = talented person achieves success late in life).

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