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

代
Putonghua pronunciation: dai4
Cantonese pronunciation: doi6
Meaning: generation, period, era, epoch, dynasty, represent, replace

代 (代 ren2, people + 步 yì4, move), verb, means 代替 (dai4 ti4 = replace-substitute), 代表 (dai4 biao3 = represent-express/represent), 取代 (qū3 dai4 = take-over-replace). Noun 代 means 時代 (shí2 dai4 = time-age/era/epoch) = historical period: 古代 (gu3 dai4 = ancient-times), 現代 (xiàn4 dai4 = modern-times), 朝代 (cháo2 dai4 = dynasty’s-ruling-period).

Carbon-14-dating determines 年代 (nian2 dai4 = year/age-period) of 青銅器 (qīng1 tōng2 qiū4 = green-bronze-vessels/utensils = bronzes) from 周代 (Zhou1 dai4 = Zhou Dynasty, 1046-256 BC). Auction-price of 青花瓷器 (qīng1 hua1 cì2 qiū4 = blue-on-white-porcelain-ware) from 元代 (Yuán2 dai4 = Yuán Dynasty, 1271-1368 AD) is USD10,000,000.

絕代風華 (jüé2 dai4 fēng1 hua2 = extinct-period-wind/airs-glamor) describes unparalleled glamor/beauty of woman/objet-d’art.

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