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

瓷 Putonghua pronunciation: ci2
Cantonese pronunciation: chi4
Meaning: porcelain, china

瓷 (radical 瓦 wa3, pottery/roof-tile) means porcelain/china. 陶瓷 (tao2 ci2 = pottery-porcelain = ceramics) include 陶 (tao2, low-fired pottery-ware), 瓷 (ci2, high-fired porcelain-ware).
Artisans mix water into 瓷土 (ci2 tu3 = porcelain-clay); shape 胎 (tail1, embryo/body); 上釉 (shang1 you3 = mount/cover-with-glaze); put inside 瓷窯 (ci2 yao2 = porcelain-kiln); 石瓷 (shao1 ci2 = fire-porcelain). Ancient Chinese 外銷瓷 (wai4 xiao1 ci2 = foreign-sold-porcelain = export china) were 日用瓷 (ri4 yong4 ci2 = daily-used-china) e.g. 瓷碗 (ci2 wan3 = porcelain-bowls), 瓷瓶 (ci2 ping2 = porcelain-bottles/jars).
宋瓷 (Song4 ci2 = Song-dynasty-porcelain-ware) include 青瓷 (qing1 ci2 = light-blue-glazed-porcelain), 白瓷 (bai2 ci2 = white-glazed-porcelain), 青花瓷 (qing1 hua1 ci2 = blue-on-white-porcelain). Ming Dynasty produced 彩瓷 (cai3 ci2 = multi-colored-porcelain).

by Diana Yue