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 history

代
Putonghua pronunciation: dai4  
Cantonese pronunciation: doi6  
Meanings: era, generation

代 = 時代 (shi2 dai4 = time-generation) = age/era/epoch in history.  
石器時代 (shi2 qi4 shi2 dai4 = stone-utensil-time-generation) = stone age.  
古代文明 (gu3 dai4 wen2 ming2 = ancient-period-writing-enlighten) = ancient civilizations.  
Actor’s 黃金時代 (huang2 jin1 shi2 dai4 = yellow-golden-era) means his peak/prime.

朝代 (chao2 dai4 = dynasty-generation) = dynasty’s ruling period, e.g. 清代 (Qing1 dai4 = Qing period/times).

老一代 (lao3 yi1 dai4 = old-one-generation = old people) and 新一代 (xin1 yi1 dai4 = new-one-generation = young people) have 代溝 (dai4 gou1 = generation-gap). Reactionary oldster snarls: “一代不如一代!” (yi1 dai4 bu4 ru2 yi1 dai4 = one-generation-not-comparable-to-one-generation = The new generation is much worse than us!)

by Diana Yue