

Character Builder

您好學？

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 ancient philosophers

Putonghua pronunciation: *mo4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *mak6*
Meanings: black, ink, Chinese surname

墨 (黑 *hei1*, black + 土 *tu3*, earth/soil) means black/ink. 磨墨 (*mo2 mo4* = grind-ink = grinding ink-stick on wet surface) produces 墨水 (*mo4 shui3* = ink-water/solution), medium for Chinese 水墨畫 (*shui3 mo4 hua4* = water-and-ink-painting).

Like Lao-zi, Confucius, Mencius, 墨子 (*Mo4 Zi3* = Mo-zi, ca. 470-391 BC) lived in 戰國時代 (*zhan4 guo2 shi2 dai4* = Warring-States-Period). A talented 木匠 (*mu4 jiang4* = wood-artisan = carpenter) who designed 雲梯 (*yun2 ti1* = mobile cloud-ladders) for 攻城 (*gong1 cheng2* = attacking/besieging-city-walls), he nevertheless preached 非攻 (*fei1 gong1* = denounce-siege = objection to aggression = pacifism).

兼愛 (*jian1 ai4* = share-love = universal love among social classes) was 墨家 (*Mo4 jia1* = Mo-zi's-school-of-thought = Mohism)'s idea.

by Diana Yue