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

儒 (radical 人 ren2, person) means scholar: 儒生 (ru2 sheng1 = scholar-student = scholar), 大儒 (da4 ru2 = great-scholar).
儒將 (ru2 jiang1 = scholarly-general), 儒商 (ru2 shang1 = scholarly-businessman) have 儒雅 (ru2 ya3 = learned-elegant) manners/diction/flair.
孔子 (Kong3-zi3 = Confucius, 551-479 BC), 孟子 (Meng4-zi3 = Mencius, 372-289 BC) preach 仁 (ren2, benevolence), 義 (yi4, righteousness), 儒家 (ru2 jia1 = scholar-school-of-thought = Confucianism)'s principle doctrines. 四書五經 (si4 shu1 wu3 jing1 = the Four-Books-Five-Classics) = the Confucian classics.
秦始皇 (Qin2 Shi3 Huang2 = Qin's-First-Emperor, 259-210 BC) 焚書坑儒 (fen2 shu1 keng1 ru2 = burnt-books-buried-scholars = persecuted Confucian teachings/teachers). Later emperors promoted 儒學 (ru2 xue2 = Confucians-studies/doctrines) because it advocates 忠 (zhong1, loyalty/obedience-to-master/ruler).

by Diana Yue