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 One Belt One Road

路 (radical 足 zu2, foot) means 道路 (dao4 lu4 = way/path-road), 路线 (lu4 xian4 = way/route/line/approach).
Engineers 筑路 (zhu4 lu4 = build-roads): 公路 (gong1 lu4 = public-road/highway), 鐵路 (tie3 lu4 = iron-road = railway).
Historic 綠綢之路 (si1 chou2 zhi1 lu4 = silk-satin-'s-road = 絲路 si1 lu4 = silk-road/route) linked China with 中西亞 (zhong1 xi1 Ya3 = Central-and-Western-Asia). 海上絲路 (hai3 shang4 si1 lu4 = sea-on/based-silk-road = Maritime Silk Route) linked China with 東南亞 (dong1 nan2 Ya3 = east-south/Southeast-Asia), India, Arabia.
China seeks 同路人 (tong2 lu4 ren2 = same-road-person = like-minded people/partners) in developing 21st-century 一帶一路 (yi1 dai4 yi1 lu4 = One-Belt-One-Road = Belt and Road Initiative, abbr. OBOR).

by Diana Yue