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

墨
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 tii1 = 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