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

韓 Putonghua pronunciation: han2 Cantonese pronunciation: hon4
Meanings: name of state, Chinese surname

韓 = ancient 韓國 (Han2 guo2 = Han-state, 11th-8th centuries, then 403-230 BC, Warring States Period). Today, 韓國 means Korea.

Philosopher 韓非 (Han2 Fei1, aka 韓非子 Han2 Fei1-zi3, 281-233 BC) was prince of 韓 and diplomat to 秦國 (Qin2 guo2 = Qin-state). He believed men were 性惡 (xing4 e2 = nature-evil = born with bad nature), advocated tyrant’s use of 法 (fa3, law), 術 (shu2, methods/schemes), 勢 (shi4, power).

His fable: Vendor brags his 矛 (mao2, spear) and 盾 (dun4, shield) are both strongest. Counter-argument: Which will prove stronger if 以子之矛, 攻子之盾 (yi3 zi3 zhi1 mao2, gong1 zi3 zhi1 dun4 = with-your-spear, attack-your-shield)? Hence modern term 矛盾 (mao2 dun4 = spear-shield = paradox/paradoxical, contradiction/contradictory).

by Diana Yue