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 filial piety

德

Putonghua pronunciation: de2
Cantonese pronunciation: dak1
Meanings: virtue, morality

Character 德 = 行 (xing2, walk/act) + 直 (zhi2, value) + 心 (xin1, heart), hence 德 means virtuous/kind heart/action. Ancient philosopher Lao-zi wrote 道德經 (dao4 de2 jing1 = way-virtue-classic = Dao De Jing, classic of Daoism). Confucians preach 仁義道德 (ren2 yi4 dao4 de2 = benevolence-integrity-way-virtue = benevolence, righteousness, morality).

Filial piety is 美德 (mei3 de2 = beautiful/praiseworthy-virtue). Helping/consoling others is 德行 (de2 xing2 = virtuous-act). Cheats/peepers/gossipers are 缺德 (que4 de2 = lack-moral = immoral/bad).

Buddhist/Daoist priests 做功德 (zuo4 gong1 de2 = do/make-achievement-benevolence = perform religious rituals to boost clients' fortune). Accepting an appointment, we say modestly/pretentiously: 何德何能! (he2 de2 he2 neng2 = how-virtuous-how-able = I'm not good/qualified enough for this!)

by Diana Yue