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:

1⁰ tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2⁰ tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3⁰ tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4⁰ 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

道
Putonghua pronunciation: dao4
Cantonese pronunciation: do6
Meanings: path, way, road, approach, direction, truth, doctrine

道 (radical 亻 chuo4, walk) means 道路 (dao4 lu4 = path-way/road), 通道 (tong1 dao4 = passage-way). 陰道 (yin1 dao4 = yin/female-passage) = woman’s vagina.

Good/righteous people follow 正道 (zheng4 dao4 = righteous-doctrine/way-of-life). Sensible people 講道理 (jiang3 dao4 li3 = talk-way-reason = argue/treat others reasonably). 治國之道 (zhi4 guo2 zhi1 dao4 = rule-state-'s-way/art) = statesmanship.

柔道 (rou2 dao4 = soft/gentle-way) = Japanese Judo.

老子 (Laozi, 5th century BC) wrote 道德經 (Dao4 De2 Jing1 = way-virtue-classic = the Dao-de-jing), explained 道 (dao4, nature’s way), 德 (de2, human nature), inspired 道家 (dao4 jia1 = Daoist-school-of-thought, Daoism). Religious converts 修道 (xiu1 dao4 = cultivate-understanding-of-truth/virtue, study/practice spiritual meditations/exercises), Today 道德 (dao4 de2 = nature-human-nature) means morals/morality.

by Diana Yue