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 Jesus' crucifixion

架
Putonghua pronunciation: jia4
Cantonese pronunciation: ga3
Meanings: rack, shelf, construct, raise, prop up

Verb 架 (加 jia1, add + 木 mu4, wood) means make/build structure: 架橋 (jia4 qiao2 = build-bridge), 疊床架屋 (die2 chuang2 jia4 wu1 = pile-beds-stack-rooms = having too many/redundant parts in plan/design). Generals 架空 (jia4 kong1 = prop-up-void = suspends) ruler's power.


Chinese term 十字架 (shi2 zhi4 jia4 = ten-character-rack = rack shaped like the Chinese character "十") means the cross. Jesus received ancient Romans’ 死刑 (si3 xing2 = death-penalty: 釘十字架 (ding1 shi2 zhi4 jia4 = nailing-on-the-cross = crucify/crucifixion).

by Diana Yue