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.

This week: Words about foreign countries

Pronunciation: tong (Putonghua, 1st tone), tung (Cantonese 1st tone)
Basic meaning: through, leading to, linking

通り (tong dao = through-route) = linking route. 通知 (tong zhi = through-know) means tell/notify. 通訊 (tong xun = through-message) means communication, exchange/distribution of information. 溝通技巧 (gou tong ji qiao = ditch-through-skill-expertise) means communication skills, e.g. foreign language proficiency. 中國通 (zhong guo tong = China-know-through = China hand = sinophile).

Cities 通商 (tong shang = through-commerce = are linked by commercial activities), 通航 (tong hang = through-sail/fly = are linked by boats/planes). 通行證 (tong xing zheng = through-move/passage-cert) = 簽證 (qian zheng = sign-certificate) = visa.

四通八達 (si tong ba da = four-through-eight-reach) describes a very accessible locale. “八達通” (ba da tong = eight-reach-through) is the Chinese name for “Octopus Card”.

by Diana Yue