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 Beijing

橋 Putonghua pronunciation: qiao2
Cantonese pronunciation: kiu4
Meanings: bridge

橋 (木 mu4, wood + 個 qiao2, tree) = 橋樑 (qiao2 liang2 = bridge-beam = bridge). Engineers 修橋 (xiu1 qiao2 = build/repair-bridges). Pedestrians/cars 過橋 (guo4 qiao2 = pass-bridge) = cross bridge. Having crossed 奈何橋 (nei4 he2 qiao2 = tolerate-how-bridge = “Helpless/Sighing Bridge”), dying souls forget world/memories.

China has beautiful ancient 拱橋 (gong3 qiao2 = arched-bridges) e.g. 蘆溝橋 (lu2 gou1 qiao2 = reeds-stream-bridge = Marco Polo Bridge) outside Beijing, where Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) began. 金水橋 (jin1 shui3 qiao2 = gold-water-bridge) strides moat encircling Beijing's 紫禁城 (zi3 jin4 cheng2 = purple/imperial-Forbidden-City).

天橋 (tian1 qiao2 = sky-bridge) means old Beijing's Tianqiao District offering folk entertainment/acrobatics/food/fun, or modern cities' 立交橋 (li4 jiao1 qiao2 = stand/three-dimensional-cross-bridge = overpasses/flyovers).

by Diana Yue