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 bridges

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

橋 (木 mu4, wood + 喬 qiao2, big tree) = 橋樑 (qiao2 liang2 = bridge-beam) = bridge: 橋拱 (qiao2 gong3 = bridge-arch), 木橋 (mu4 qiao2 = wooden-bridge), 石橋 (shi2 qiao2 = stone-bridge), 吊橋 (diao4 qiao2 = suspension-bridge). 天橋 (tian1 qiao2 = sky-bridge) = crossover/flyover. 過橋抽板 (guo4 qiao chou1 ban3 = cross-bridge-pull-plank) means using someone then dumping him. 橋 invokes poetic/mythical imagination. Magpies form 鶴橋 (que1 qiao2 = magpies-bridge) enabling separated lovers' annual rendezvous. Dead people cross 奈何橋 (nei4 he2 qiao2 = tolerate-how-bridge = “Helpless Bridge”) and leave world/memories behind.

Famous poetic line 小橋流水人家 (xiao3 qiao2 liu2 shui3 ren2 jia1 = little-bridge-flowing-water-person’s-home) = “A cottage facing bridge on rippling brook — someone’s abode”.

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