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 maps

Pronunciation: tu (Putonghua, 2nd tone), to (Cantonese, 4th tone)
Basic meaning: picture

圖 = graphic shape: 圖象 (tu xiang = picture-image), 圖畫 (tu hua = picture-painting), 圖案 (tu an = picture-plan = pattern), 藍圖 (lan tu = blue-picture) = blueprint. 圖片 (tu pian = picture-piece = pictures/photos). 繪圖師 (hui tu shi = draw/paint-picture-master) = graphic artist.


圖窮匕現 (tu qiong bi xian = picture-exhaust/end-dagger-appear) describes an assassin unrolling a map to reveal a dagger — his intention/plot to stab the king, create trouble, conceal secret agenda, is exposed.

by Diana Yue