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

樑 (radical 木 mu4, wood) = roof beam: 主樑 (zhu3 liang2 = main-beam/girder), 橫樑 (heng2 liang2 = horizontal-beam). 橋樑 (qiao2 liang2 = bridge-beam) = bridge. 樑上君子 (liang2 shanag jün1 ziO = beam-on-honorable-man = gentleman crouching under the roof-beam) means thief.

國之樑柱 (guo2 zhi1 dong4 liang2 = state~'s~column~girder) = minister/hero upholding government. 偷樑換柱 (tou1 liang2 huan4 zhu4 = steal-beam~change-column) = stealthily altering original plan. 上樑不正下樑歪 (shang4 liang2 bu4 zheng4 xia4 liang2 wai1 = upper-beam-not-straight/correct-lower-beam-incorrect) = bad/immoral superior will make subordinates follow suit.

樑 also means ridge: 高鼻樑 (gao1 bi2 liang2 = high-nose-ridge = tall nose), 挺起脊樑 (ting2 qi3 zhi4 liang2 = straighten-up-back/spine) = brace oneself up.

by Diana Yue