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

Putonghua pronunciation: kua4
Cantonese pronunciation: kwa3
Meanings: take big strides, straddle, ride, go across

Ideogram 跨 (足 zhu1, foot + 夸 kua1, empty) indicates two legs standing apart, leaving space under crotch. 跨開大步 (kua1 kai da4 bu4 = stride-open-big-steps) = taking big strides forward. 跨越 (kua1 yue2 = stride-pass) = pass, overtake. 跨過門坎 (kua1 guo4 men2 kan3 = stride/cross-over-door's-floor-bar) means successfully meet/surpass requirements.

Rider 跨上馬背 (kua1 shang4 ma3 bei4 = stride-on-to-horse-back = mounts horse). Athlete 跨欄 (kua1 lan2 = cross-over-fence = jumps hurdles). Government launches 跨部門 (kua1 bu4 men2 = striding-ministry-door = interdepartmental) project. 跨國企業 (kua1 guo4 qian3 ye4 = striding-countries-stranding-industry) = multinational enterprise.

金門橋 (jin1 men2 qiao2 = Golden-Gate-Bridge) 橫跨 (heng2 kua1 = across-stride = strides over) mouth of San Francisco Bay.

by Diana Yue