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

通
Putonghua pronunciation: tong1
Cantonese pronunciation: tung1
Meanings: through, lead to, link, go to

通 (radical 舟 = 舟 zhou1, boat) means going through/to. 通道 (tong1 dao4 = through-route) = thoroughfare/passageway. 開通 (kai tong1 = open-through) person is 通達 (tong1 da2 = through-reach = uninhibited/understanding). 融會貫通 (rong2 hui4 guan4 tong1 = melt-merge-penetrate-through) means thoroughly understanding linkage/relationship between separate points/disciplines.

橋樑 (qiao2 liang2 = bridge-beam = bridges) let cars/trains/trucks 通過 (tong1 guo4 = pass-through), facilitate regions’ 通商 (tong1 shang1 = through-commerce = trading). 青馬大橋 (Qing1 Ma3 da4 qiao2 = Tsing-Yi-Ma-Wan-big-bridge = Tsing Ma Bridge) 通往 (tong1 wang3 = goes-to) the Hongkong International Airport.

Spies 通風報訊 (tong1 feng1 bao4 xun4 = pass-wind-report-message = supply/pass on information). 中國通 (zhong1 guo2 tong1 = China-know-through) = China hand = sinophile.

by Diana Yue