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: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: work, craft, engineering, clever, fine, sophisticated

Pictogram 工, depicting carpentry tool, means work: 工作 (gong1 zuo2 = work-do = work), 工廠 (gong1 chang3 = work-factory), 工業 (gong1 ye4 = work/craft-profession = industry). Chinese address 工程師 (gong1 cheng2 shi1 = work-process-master = engineers) as “工”: 胡工 (Hu2 gong1 = Mr Hu, engineer).

水利工程 (shui3 li4 gong1 cheng2 = water-benefit-engineer-process = irrigation projects) include 埠 (ba4, dams), 橋 (qiao2, bridges), 人工湖 (ren2 gong1 hu2 = human-work-lake = artificial lakes). 工人 (gong1 ren2 = work-person = workers) have started 施工 (shi1 gong1 = apply-work = doing construction) on 港珠澳大橋 (Gang3 Zhu1Ao4 da4 qiao2 = Hongkong-Zhuhai-Macau-Bridge).

鬼斧神工 (gui3 fu3 shen2 gong1 = ghost’s-axe-god’s-craft) describes superhuman/stunning craftsmanship/technology.

by Diana Yue