

Character Builder 您好學？

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 Beijing

北

Putonghua pronunciation: *bei3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *bak1*

Meanings: north, northern, northward

北 (showing couple back to back) means north: 北風 (*bei3 feng1* = north-wind), 北方 (*bei3 fang1* = northern-direction/region), 北極 (*bei3 ji2* = north-utmost = North Pole), 北斗 (*bei3 dou3* = north-ladle = the Big Dipper). Map shows 東南西北 (*dong1 nan2 xi1 bei3* = east-south-west-north).

東北 (*dong1 bei3* = east-north) = northeastern China. 西北 (*xi1 bei3* = west-north) = northwestern China. 南水北調 (*nan2 shui3 bei3 diao4* = south-water-north-divert = south-north water transfer) project addresses geographical imbalance of 南澇北旱 (*nan2 lao2 bei3 han3* = south-flooded-north-arid).

北京 (*bei3 jing1* = north-capital = Beijing) is in 河北省 (*he2 bei3 sheng3* = river-north-province = Hebei Province) in 華北 (*hua2 bei3* = China-north = northern China).

by Diana Yue