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 the Manchurian people

北
Putonghua pronunciation: bei3
Cantonese pronunciation: bak1
Meaning: north, northern, northward

北 (radical 北 bi3, spoon) means north: 北方 (bei3 fang1 = north-direction/region = the North), 北風 (bei3 feng1 = north-wind), 北京 (Bei3 Jing1 = Beijing), 北極 (bei3 ji2 = north-ultra = North Pole). Compass shows 東南西北 (dong1 nan2 xi1 bei3 = east-south-west-north).

Manchu/Manchurians are 東北人 (dong1 bei3 ren2 = east-north-people = NE Chinese) from 東三省 (dong1 san1 sheng3 = east-three-province = three northeastern provinces): 遼寧 (Liao2 Ning2), 吉林 (Ji2 Lin2), 黑龍江 (Hei1 Long2 Jiang1).

Heilongjiang's 北大荒 (bei3 da4 huang1 = north-big-wilderness = the Great Northern Wilderness) is now wheat-belt. 發展大西北 (fa1 zhan3 da4 xi1 bei3 = develop-extend-great-west-north = "Developing the Great Northwest", i.e. northwestern provinces) is 21st century goal.

by Diana Yue