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

Putonghua pronunciation: guan1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwaan1
Meaning: shut, close, imprison, mountain pass, check-point, entry-exit point

閘 (radical 門 men2, door) means 閘隘 (guan1 ai4 = pass-narrow = narrow-mountain-pass) or shut/close. At customs 關卡 (guan1 qia3 = pass-block = check-point), entrants 報關 (bao4 guan1 = declare-at-pass belongings), 通關 (tong1 guan1 = go-through-pass = clear customs).

閘門 (guan1 men2 = close/shut-door) also means close operation. PoWs 被關 (bei4 guan1 = are-shut-up/imprisoned).

閘口 (guan1 kou3 = pass-mouth) means crucial frontier-pass/check-point/juncture. Competitor 閘關 (chuang3 guan1 = attack-guarded-pass = challenges blocks/red-lines/difficulties), 過關斬將 (guo4 guan1 zhan3 jiang4 = cross-guarded-pass-chop/kill-knight = passes blocks/stages/difficulties).

In 1644 Manchurian armies/invaders passed through 山海關 (Shan1 Hai1 Guan1 = Shanhaiguan Pass) on eastern section of 長城 (Chang2 Cheng2 = long-wall = the Great Wall), marched south, overthrew Ming Dynasty, established Qing Dynasty.

by Diana Yue