Character Builder

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 ̀ 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

旗
Putonghua pronunciation: qi2
Cantonese pronunciation: kei4
Meaning: flag, banner, Manchurian military/administrative division

旗 (radical 方 fang1, square) means 旗槓 (qi2 zhi4 = flag-pennant); 國旗 (guo2 qi2 = national-flag), 軍旗 (jun1 qi2 = army-flag/standard), 師旗 (qi2 shou3 = flag-hand = standard-bearer/waver), 旗艦店 (qi2 jian4 dian4 = brand-name’s flagship-store). 旗鼓相當 (qi2 gu3 xiang1 dang1 = flags-drums-match-equal) describes equally-strong camps/sides.

Old Manchuria had 八旗 (ba1 qi2 = eight-banners = eight military/demographic/administrative divisions): two 紅旗 (hong2 qi2 = red-banners), two blue/yellow/white, hence terms 旗人 (qi2 ren2 = banner/Manchurian-people), 八旗子弟 (ba1 qi2 zhi3 di4 = eight-banners-sons-younger-brothers = banner/Manchurian men). Qing Dynasty established 盟旗 (meng2 qi2 = league-banner = Mongolian-Manchurian regional administration) system.

Banner-men kept 簦子 (bian1 zhi0 = queue/pigtail-diminutive = queues/pigtails). Banner-women wore 旗袍 (qi2 pao2 = Manchurian/Chinese-style-long-gowns).

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