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 xil1 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 南濕北旱 (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).

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