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 San Francisco

西
Putonghua pronunciation: xi1
Cantonese pronunciation: sai1
Meaning: west, westward, western

西 means west. China is 中國 (Zhong1 Guo2 = Middle-Kingdom), with 東南西北 (dong1 nan2 xil bei3 = east-south-west-north) regions. 21st century's target is 開發大西北 (kai1 fa1 da4 xil bei3 = open-develop-big-west-north = developing the huge northwestern region).

東洋 (dong1 yang2 = region across eastern-ocean) means Japan, 西洋 (xil yang2 = region across western-ocean) means Europe/Americas, i.e. 西方 (xil fang1 = west-direction/region = the West).

US territory expanded 由東至西 (you2 dong1 zhi4 xil = from-east-to-west). Whites 打紅番 (da3 hong2 fan1 = fought-red-Indians), 擒地 (qiang3 di4 = snatched/took-land), won 西部 (xil bu4 = west-part/region = the West), 殖民 (zhi2 min2 = plant-people = established settlementscolonies), developed 西岸 (xil an4 = west-coast).

by Diana Yue