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 Qing Dynasty

Putonghua pronunciation: qing2
Cantonese pronunciation: ching1
Meanings: pure, clean, plain, name of Chinese dynasty

清 (qi2ng) = 水 shui3, water + 青 qing1, blue/green) means clear/pure/clean: 清潔 (qing1 jie2 = pure-clean), 清水 (qing1 shui3 = plain-water without additives), 清理 (qing1 li3 = clean-tidy-up). Locusts 吃清光 (chi1 qing1 guan1 = eat-clean-finish = eat up all) crops.

清高 (qing1 gao1 = pure-lofty = principled, uncompromising) official refuses bribes, 兩袖清風 (jiang3 xiu4 qing1 feng1 = two-sleeves-fresh/cool/wind = has little money).

滿蒙回藏 (Han4, Man3, Meng2, Hui2, Zang4) are China’s major ethnic races. 滿人 (Man3 ren2 = Man-people = the Manchus/Manchurians), northeastern nomads earlier called 女真 (Nü3 Zhen1) and 金 (Jin1), conquered 漢人 (Han4 ren2 = Han-people = the Han-Chinese), established 清朝 (Qing1 Chao2 = the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911).