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 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

旗 (radical 方 fang1, square) means 旗幟 (qi2 zhi4 = flag-iconic-cloth-strip = flag/banner/pennant): 國旗 (guo2 qi2 = national-flag), 軍旗 (jün1 qi2 = army-flag), 旗手 (qi2 shou3 = flag-hand = standard-bearer), 旗艦店 (qi2 jian4 dian4 = flag-ship-shop). 旗鼓相當 (qi2 gu3 xiang1 dang1 = flags-drums-match-equal) describes equally strong camps/sides.

滿人 (Man3 ren2 = Manchurian people) were divided into 八旗 (ba1 qi2 = eight-banners, military-administrative units): two 紅旗 (hong2 qi2 = red-banners), two blue/yellow/white, hence called 旗人 (qi2 ren2 = banner-people/men/women).

Bannermen 結辮 (jie2 bian1 = knot-queue = wear long queue/pigtail), bannerwomen wore 旗袍 (qi2 pao2 = Manchurian-gown). Manchurian nobility kept 騎射 (qi2 she4 = horse-riding/horseanship-archery) tradition, used 包衣 (bao1 yi1 = domestic slaves).

by Diana Yue