

Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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 longevity

Putonghua pronunciation: *shou4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sau6*

Meaning: age, life-span, longevity, birthday, funerary item

壽 (with top part showing top half of character 老 *lao3*, old/aged/used/passé) means 壽命 (*shou4 ming4* = age-life). 壽辰 (*shou4 chen2* = age-hour) = birthday. Birthday-girl 做壽 (*zuo4 shou4* = do/make/celebrates-birthday), receives 壽禮 (*shou4 li3* = birthday-rite = birthday presents). 人壽保險 (*ren2 shou4 bao3 xian3* = human-age/life-protect-risk) = life insurance.

Fortune-readers say long ears are 壽徵 (*shou4 zheng1* = longevity-indication), evil-doers will 折壽 (*zhe2 shou4* = bend/break/discount-age = have life shortened). Person 壽終 (*shou4 zhong1* = life-terminate = dies), is fitted into 壽衣 (*shou4 yi1* = deceased's-funeral-outfit), 壽材 (*shou4 cai2* = deceased's-coffin).

Tortoise can 龜縮 (*gui1 suo1* = tortoise-withdraw into own shell) to avoid trouble, hence it symbolizes 長壽 (*chang2 shou4* = long-life = longevity).

by Diana Yue