

Character Builder 您好學？

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 funerals



Putonghua pronunciation: *shou4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sau6*

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

壽 (its top part is top of character 老 *lao3*, old/aged/used/passé) means 壽命 (*shou4 ming4* = age-life), 壽辰 (*shou4 chen2* = age-hour = birthday). Grandpa 做壽 (*zuo4 shou4* = do/make/celebrates-birthday), receives 壽禮 (*shou4 li3* = birthday-presents). His long ears are 壽徵 (*shou4 zheng1* = longevity-indication/symbol).

Tortoise symbolizes 長壽 (*chang2 shou4* = long-life/longevity). Chinese home displays figurines of 福祿壽 (*fu2 lu4 shou4* = three stars/immortals symbolizing blessings-high-official-rank-longevity). 壽終正寢 (*shou4 zhong1 zheng4 qin3* = life-end-proper-sleep = oldster dies peacefully in bed) also describes well-established magazine/project's termination.

Sage advises: buying 人壽保險 (*ren2 shou4 bao3 xian3* = human-age/life-protect-risk = life insurance) helps your family, but doing bad things 折壽 (*zhe2 shou4* = bend/break/discount-age = cuts short your life).

by Diana Yue